

CRY TO DREAM AGAIN

by

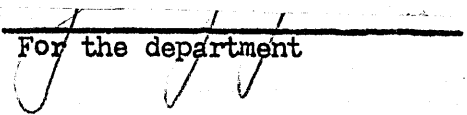
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A.B., Washburn University of Topeka, 1958

Submitted to the Department of
English and the Faculty of the
Graduate School of the University
of Kansas in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts.

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For the department

CHAPTER I

Crimmons, who was the post sergeant-major, and I sat gossiping and sipping coffee that afternoon in the dispensary, as we did most afternoons right after lunch. Tesfi, the Eritrean we kept around the dispensary, would brew a pot while I was at lunch and then Crimmons and I would have our coffee there in the dispensary rather than in the mess hall. Sometimes Mike Clementi, the Chief NCO at the radio relay station, came in to gossip with us; we were the only three master-sergeants on the post and between us we thought we knew what was worth knowing on the post.

And we probably did, for Radio Marina wasn't much of a post; about sixty soldiers and maybe twenty signal men lived there within walking distance of downtown Asmara. The Italians built the post and used it as the center of their communications system in East Africa through the thirties, and they built it with an eye for comfort. The permanent buildings were white-washed stucco--flat tops, high ceilings, tile floors, lots of windows--pleasant to look at and good to work in. The dispensary was one of these, and the two-bed hospital across the street, also post headquarters, the supply building, the PX, and the two clubs, one for officers and sergeants and the other for what the British call "other ranks." The long, low, pre-fab barracks we lived in had been added later and they weren't as nice to look at as the rest of the buildings on the post, but about half the men lived downtown anyway.

All these buildings were at one end of the post and on a slight rise; down the hill and across an athletic field was the motor pool. There was a rock wall around the whole post, whitewashed like the buildings. Add a few dark green eucalyptus around the white buildings and above the trees put in a couple of spectacular but useless antenna towers which the Italians had erected when the post was theirs and you ought to have a pretty good picture of the post.

You can paint in a sky over that--light blue and very bright, a startling blue without a cloud in it anywhere--and you'll be right nine and a half to ten months of any year.

If you think from what I've said that I liked the place, you are right, too. I loved it. Even now when I hear somebody talking about home or the good old days I think of that post at Asmara the way it was in 1948, the way I saw it through the window of the dispensary that afternoon.

That day there were a few clouds in the sky over the northern horizon and east and south, over the Abyssinian escarpment. Not that I could see all that from the window of the dispensary; all I could see was the hospital building across the street and then off to the left of that the guard station at the main gate and a line of low clouds between them. But there was humidity in the air and a kind of general lethargy that always came just before the rainy season when the clouds built up day by day, first just a faint line in the late afternoon, then as the days passed getting closer and heavier, drawing in on the blue sky, until one morning about ten o'clock they would come on over and dump rain on us. They would come twice a day after that, then three times a day, drenching the highlands with a windless downpour for

an hour at a time, and the lethargy would be broken; the young men at the post, the short-timers, would openly cavort in the warm rain and even the old-timers like Crimmons and Mike Clementi and me would find an excuse to walk in it now and then and in the evenings we would sit on the patio of the club after the late evening rain and make small-talk, more or less consciously inhaling great gulps of the cool, humid air.

That afternoon we were talking about the doctor who had been assigned to the post and who was expected to arrive on the next plane. His predecessor, a little jewel whom the troops called "Dear Wilfred," had been shipped home with a bad case of the DT's three months before. Since then I had been running the dispensary, holding sick call once a day, and taking the cases I couldn't handle to the Ospedale Regina, the Italian hospital in downtown Asmara.

We knew that the new doctor--a captain, single, no prior overseas service, according to his orders--had been in Dhahran for several days, waiting for a plane to Asmara. It was the fall of 1948 and many of the planes from Dhahran were in Germany, flying the airlift run in to Berlin. Crimmons thought the doctor would be lucky to get out of Dhahran in three weeks.

"I can wait," I said.

"Sure, I'll bet you can. He'll probably break up your playhouse when he gets here. Make you go to work for a change."

"What work? There won't be any more to do when he gets here than there is now. And there'll be two of us to do it."

"Yeah--what a racket. Wait till the wives and kids start coming in next spring, though. You won't have it so easy--measles, chicken-pox, all that. Then, when they've been here a few months, there'll be

the pregnant women to look after. You ever deliver a baby, Al?"

"I guess I can learn."

"Ha--old Al Shannon, midwife."

Crimmons had a crude sense of humor.

We finished our coffee, Crimmons left, and I put my feet up on the desk, all set to recognize the pre-rain, mid-afternoon lethargy officially by napping a little, when the phone rang.

It was Mike Clementi, calling from the station five miles out of town, and when I heard what he had to say, I knew I would have to put the nap off. They had picked up a morse signal, weak and erratic but partially readable, from a plane. It was a C-47 out of Dhahran and was apparently down in the desert somewhere inland from Massawa and not too far from the highway between Asmara and Massawa. The British, of course, ought to be the ones to go looking for it, because the country was under British military administration, but Mike had tried to call their constable in Massawa and couldn't get through--the standard situation--so he decided that as it was an American plane, we ought to look for it ourselves.

I called Crim and told him where we were going and he promised to get in touch with the British in Asmara and get them to contact Massawa by radio, and also to let the Post Commander, Major Wilson, know what we were doing. If we weren't back by morning, Crimmons would haul the men who came on sick call downtown, and if we didn't show up by the following evening, he was to send a couple of vehicles full of men after us. And if all of this seems to you like a hell of a military operation, all I can say is that it ought to give you some idea of the way things were run at Asmara. A plane was down, we

didn't have any idea what shape its crew was in, and there wasn't time to wait until somebody else did something about it. The temperature in the desert near the coast of the Red Sea that far south would be something over one hundred in the daytime, even with the rainy season coming on; at night it would drop to a pleasant eighty--pleasant if you weren't hurt and had plenty of water, and could keep your mind off the shiftas, the bandits who infested the hills around the road from Massawa to Asmara. Anyhow, nobody on the post would be upset because we had hurried off as soon as we got the news.

I kept an old three-quarter ton ambulance around the dispensary, but I decided against taking it; too top heavy for the mountainous road down to the desert and too hot once you got there. I called up the motor pool and got a jeep instead.

By the time Clementi got in from the station with his weapons carrier, I had gotten together some medical supplies, food, water, gas, and two Thompsons with several fifty-round drums of ammunition. The stuff made quite a pile on the steps of the dispensary; I called Tesfi out to help us load, and the Eritrean guard from the main gate came over to give us a hand. I tried to get him to go down to the guard quarters by the motor pool and get a couple of the off-duty guards to go with us, but he couldn't understand a word I said. When I got Tesfi to interpret for me, the guard just grinned and shook his head.

"Shiftas," Tesfi said. "He's afraid for shiftas."

"Shiftys, hell," I said. "He looks like a shifty himself. We need somebody to interpret for us, Tesfi. How about you?"

"Not me, Sergeant Al. Who gonna run the dispensary? You know the road and Sergeant Mike speak good. You wait until tomorrow and

take the British convoy. I don't talk to shiftas."

"You're a snob, Tesfi. An honest snob."

There had been a lot of robbery on the Massawa road recently and the British ran an armed convoy between Massawa and Asmara once or twice a day, depending on the amount of traffic waiting at the roadblock. Civilians didn't go down the road at any other time, but American military vehicles were let through the roadblock at the edge of town if they were carrying automatic weapons--that was the reason for the Thompsons. I had been half-kidding with Tesfi, though I did wish we had another man or two, but I didn't know anybody who would go.

It's thirty miles from Asmara down to Massawa if you can go in a straight line, but you can't unless you fly because the road drops 8000 feet in that thirty miles and it drops through some of the roughest mountains you ever saw; it twists and writhes and doubles back on itself like a cranky rattler with a belly-ache. Before it settles down for the last ten miles of straight going across the desert to the coast, it has used up sixty miles of mountains.

About fifty miles down the road there is a level spot for a mile or so, a kind of table-land that is well watered and still high enough to be cool. At one time there had been orchards and truck gardens there, and a handful of houses, a store, and a cafe-bar, but after the war the shiftas kept at it, burning and looting and raising general hell until there was nothing left but the cafe.

A fat, grizzled, pig-eyed Italian ran the place, and he had a good thing there when the road was open because everybody who knew the road stopped there to cool the brakes on their vehicles. Louie, he was called, and he spoke a good standard brand of Midwestern American ac-

quired during the years he was in business in and around Chicago. The repeal of prohibition ruined his business and he went back to Italy during the mid-thirties, eventually ending up in Eritrea, then one of Italy's most promising colonies. Things didn't work out for the colony, of course, but Louie had somehow acquired the cafe there at Ghinda, sticking it out after everybody else was gone.

Below Ghinda the road drops in a straight line for about five miles. It is a long, steep grade, the last one on the road to Massawa, running along the side of the canyon wall, with a flat, hot finger of the desert on the other side. It's a killer, that grade, because it's so straight that after the twists and turns of the road above it you lose the sense of descending and before you know it or feel it at all, you are picking up speed, picking it up, wind whistling by and motor over-revving, rocky walls on the right blurring in your vision. If you keep cool you can bump the brakes until you've killed enough speed to allow you to shift down and make the turn at the bottom. But the bridge over the dry creek that marks that turn is scarred with rips and gashes of the vehicles of people who didn't keep cool or who tried that five mile slope with brakes already hot from the mountains above, and one of the marks is mine.

So Mike pulled in at Ghinda as a matter of course, and I drove in behind him, parking almost against the railing of the patio that ran around the cafe on three sides.

It was dusk by this time; the patio was dark and its tables deserted but light blazed through the open door to the cafe dining room; we crossed the patio and went in.

A bar ran the full length of the wall to the left of the door

of the large main room; the center was open, and on the right side were tables. At one of these sat Louie and two American pilots that Mike and I both knew by sight for they regularly flew the Dhahran-Asmara run and we had drunk with them in the club at Asmara. We had found our lost air crew.

The older of the two, a nervously flamboyant Italian-American who had flown too many combat missions during the war and who flew the dumpy C-47's as though they were P-51's, greeted us as we came through the door--or greeted Mike, rather, for he spoke Italian. What he said must have been funny; both he and old Louie laughed. Their faces were flushed and both of them were tight on the wine; the younger pilot nodded to us and then sat with a rueful little grin on his face, staring into his wine.

An American I hadn't seen before came through the door from the kitchen; he was tall and well-built, probably close to my age--twenty-eight--and though he had a black stubble beard on his face and was dressed in khakis that were stained and dusty and brine-encrusted in spots, he looked clean--the way he carried himself, I thought, and the quiet, crisp voice and the self-confident smile.

"Dave Wright," he said, crossing to us and shaking hands with us in turn. Even if I hadn't seen the insignia on his collar, I'd have known who he was because I'd seen his name on orders.

"You must be our new doctor. I'm Al Shannon, your chief medical assistant at Asmara. Chief and only."

"Good. I can get right into the swing of things. Get the low-down on the post before I even get there. We'll be ready to go as soon as we've eaten. You'll eat with us, won't you? Nothing elaborate,

but plenty of it. I've been in the kitchen showing Carla how to make an American hamburger. We've had to improvise, but they'll do."

He said it as naturally as though he owned the place, and the way Carla and he worked together serving out the plates of hamburgers and pan-fried potatoes, he might have been the new boss. Carla was old Louie's granddaughter, I had heard, and I remembered seeing her around the place, but always in the background; I can't say that I'd really noticed her before except to get the impression that she was young--maybe in her early teens.

As I watched her serve the meal, though, it was clear that I'd never think of her as a little girl again; she was thin but unmistakably feminine, with the soft curves of young maturity showing in every movement. And she was beautiful. Deep brown eyes, almost but not quite too large for her face, a firm, fine chin, generous mouth, and high forehead; her whole face just noticeably whiter than her tanned arms and framed in thick black hair swept back and falling straight to her shoulders; I'd have noticed her in a room full of women.

I wasn't the only one who noticed her. As she served the plates of food, the nervous pilot broke off his conversation with Mike in the middle of a sentence and smiled at her in open admiration, and even the gloomy co-pilot looked up from his wine and seemed to forget his troubles momentarily. Mike stroked his heavy moustache and said, "Che bellezza," very softly. He was looking at the plate she placed before him when he said it, but I didn't think he was talking about the hamburger and neither did Carla, for she blushed.

Dave, who had been filling the plates in the kitchen and handing them out the door to Carla, brought in the last two himself. Carla

Carla took her plate from him and started toward a table in the back of the room; she had moved two steps in that direction when Dave caught up with her in a single stride, reached over her shoulder, took the plate from her hand, and put it on the table next to Louie. He held a chair for her and then took the seat on the other side of her. As she sat down, old Louie gave her a stern grandfatherly glance that explained why I hadn't seen much of her when I'd stopped at Ghinda before. I thought I'd get to see her blush again but I didn't; if there was anything in the look she shot back at Grandpa, it was pure impudence.

While we ate we listened to the story of the plane crash, the older pilot doing most of the talking. They had lost one engine over the Red Sea north of Massawa, he said, and because they were so heavily loaded with radio gear for the station at Asmara, they couldn't maintain enough altitude to get up on the escarpment; after a couple of tries at it, they picked a level place in the desert and set her in. The pilot told the story gleefully, with appropriate gestures, like a teen-age boy telling his buddies how he had wrecked his dad's car.

They had piled in down in the desert valley below Ghinda and somebody up at Louie's place saw the wreck. Louie and Carla went down to it in their old Flat truck by way of a dirt road that had been built down into the valley back in the days when some plantation owner at Ghinda had tried to start an irrigated garden on the floor of the valley. The plane carried no radio operator, which explained why they hadn't been in contact with Asmara before the crash, but among them they had gotten the radio in operation for a few minutes, long enough to send the garbled message Mike picked up at the station.

"Hurt the plane much?" Mike asked.

"Tore it all to hell," the pilot said. "I hit a ditch and collapsed the gear on the port side, then the prop went in--that was our good engine; we had the starboard engine feathered--and spun off the hub and came slicing through the cockpit. That's when I got this."

He stood up, and for the first time I noticed that he had been sitting on a pillow. He turned around, favoring his left leg noticeably; there was a neat gash through the seat of his flight trousers on the left side and a streak of bloodstain down the pants leg. The tear had been drawn together in the center with a safety pin; through the gaps on each side of the pin I could see gauze bandage.

I looked at the doctor and said, "I've got some stuff in the jeep if you need it. Anybody else hurt?" It occurred to me that I ought to have asked before, but what the hell--he was a doctor.

He shook his head. "Superficial cut. I had a first-aid kit with me. We'll look at it again before we leave for Asmara."

Wright wanted to leave for Asmara as soon as we finished eating, but Mike wouldn't hear of it and I wasn't keen on it either. We explained that we'd be sitting ducks for the shiftas at night on that road; they could hear a truck coming for miles--far enough ahead so that they would have plenty of time to set up a roadblock and wait in the dark among the rocks until we stopped for it.

I had a few blankets among the gear in the truck, and Louie dug out some more. We all bedded down on the floor in the dining room except Louie and Carla, who had rooms somewhere in the building.

I didn't sleep much that night. Louie shuttered and barred the windows and doors and it seemed stuffy to me. I could hear the Eritrean guard he had posted on the patio, too, pacing up and down most of the

night. Now and then the pilot with the cut hip would roll over on that hip and groan. Mike Clementi snored and so did Dave Wright, and I lay awake most of the night.

When I finally got to sleep and was dreaming that I was back in the dispensary, my feet on the desk, watching the thin line of clouds over on the horizon, just ready to drop off for a short nap, somebody tapped me on the shoulder, and it was daylight and time to go.

Before we started the pilot with the cut hip began complaining about it so Wright looked at it, put a fresh dressing on it, and made a couple of bad jokes about the only official half-assed pilot in the air force. Then we took off for Asmara, Mike and the two airmen in the weapons carrier and Wright and I in the jeep.

"How bad is the cut on his hip?" I asked as we started up the first long grade toward Asmara. I hadn't seen it when he dressed it, having been busy making the pilot a litter to lie on in the back of the truck, but it seemed to me that Wright had been pretty offhand about the whole thing.

"Not bad. Not causing him half as much pain as his hangover."

"Maybe he's worried about that wrecked plane."

"I don't see why. He did what he could do. You heard his story."

"Yeah, I heard it. But if he has to tell it to a board of inquiry, there are a few points they will want to clarify."

"Like what?"

"Like, one, why he wasn't in communication with the airfield in Asmara on his voice radio. Two, why he didn't send a morse message earlier--when he first got in trouble. Then, three, why he picked that valley to land in when he could have put down on a smooth sand

beach anywhere along the coast--or could have landed at the old bomber strip at Massawa, ten or fifteen miles away. Shall I go on?"

"Never mind. I'll tell you the whole story. You know anything about this pilot, Albers?"

"I know him, but I didn't know his name was Albers. Hell, I thought he was an Italian. He speaks it like a native."

"On his mother's side. His father was a German; went back to Nazi Germany in '39 and left the boy and his mother in New York. It made him pretty bitter and he still never talks about it. Everybody in Dhahran calls him 'Garibaldi' and most of them think that's his name."

"He apparently talked to you about it."

"Yeah. Anyway, all that's unimportant." He thought a minute, then said, "The whole thing is my fault. Maybe I can explain to you. You've been in Dhahran; you know what a hole it is. Well, I was stuck there. I had a low priority and with so many of their planes and crews tied up in Berlin, I hadn't much chance of moving. I snooped around the operations office in the daytime and found out that they had a fairly high priority cargo of radio equipment for Asmara and a plane to move it with, but no crew. I hung around the club at night and one way and another I got together an air crew--Albers, temporarily off flying status and waiting for transportation to the States, and the co-pilot, who was supposed to go on leave but who cancelled the leave so he could make this trip. We hadn't a radio operator, but I checked out on the morse transmitter and thought I could manage it if I had to. The hardest part was selling the operations officer on the whole deal, but he finally came around because he had that high-priority

cargo on his hands and no way to move it."

He paused and I said, "All right--you angled and managed to get out of Dhahran. But that doesn't make the wreck your fault."

He grinned. "You haven't heard it all yet. We left Dhahran early--real early--a little after midnight by our time here. We landed in Jidda, gassed up, and were along the coast of Eritrea by maybe eight o'clock. We could have been down in Asmara by nine."

"We didn't get your radio message until after noon. Couldn't you get the radio to work?"

"Oh, we had it working right after the crash. What we were doing was flying up and down valleys along the escarpment. We started in along the edge of the escarpment on the north of Asmara; flew up a long valley until we ran into peaks and cliffs below a town called Cheren, as nearly as I could tell from the map. You know the place?"

I nodded; they had been in the southern part of the Sudanese desert, in the northeast corner of Eritrea.

"Then we worked our way east and south, around the corner of the escarpment, flying up most of the bigger valleys."

"What in the hell did Albers want to do that for?"

"He didn't really want to; I talked him into it. Of course, he'd been drinking most of the trip and he actually didn't care nearly as much as he would have if he'd been sober. The co-pilot didn't like it much but he went along with it."

I didn't say anything. I concentrated on watching the tailgate of Mike's truck, wondering at the same time what kind of madman I had fallen in with.

"We'd have been all right, I think, if Albers hadn't insisted

on landing. We couldn't talk him out of it; maybe I didn't try too hard. Anyway, the ground was smooth enough."

"Except for that one insignificant ditch," I couldn't help saying.

"There wasn't any ditch. Albers thought that up later. We got down okay--it was on take-off that we had the trouble. Albers was showing me how he used to snatch a P-51 off the ground by getting up flying speed, then pulling the gear right out from under it. Only the left wheel on a C-47 comes up before the right one. I didn't know that, did you? And when the left wheel came up, that wing dropped, the prop on that side hit the ground, spun off the engine, and came through the cockpit."

I thought his story over. I didn't know him well enough to tell whether he was lying or not, but I thought the story had the wild improbability that truth frequently has.

Finally I said, "You must have had a good reason to want to fly around in the desert."

He shot a glance at me, then stared ahead again. "It seemed a good reason at the time. What I wanted was to see some of the country, get the feel of it, you know. In the back of my mind I have the idea I might want to settle down around here when my tour of duty is up. And I thought that as long as we were flying over the country anyway, why not take a look at some of it? Albers was just the man to do it, so I took advantage of the opportunity."

I couldn't help smiling, and suddenly he began to laugh. "I can see how it will look to the men at Asmara--their new doctor careening around in the desert with a drunken pilot. Just the thing to inspire

confidence and create that good old doctor-patient relationship we learned about in medical school. It's a good way to get started."

"I wouldn't worry about it. They'll judge you on how good you are at doctoring. It's that kind of post."

"That's all right, then. I'm good enough. Better than average, I suppose, when I work at it. And I work at it when I have to."

"You sound a little disillusioned with your profession, Captain."

"Not at all--it's a good enough trade, if you don't forget that a trade is all it is. Call me Dave if you can. I don't think I could work around somebody all day who called me Captain."

"I'll try. There may be times when 'Dave' won't do."

"You'll know them. Look, what am I going to do about this mess with the plane? You know this place; is there any way I can get Albers off the hook? I'll gladly take the blame because it was my fault from the beginning, but I don't suppose the brass will see it that way."

"Why don't you go to Wilson--Major Wilson, the post commander--and tell him the whole thing. Don't dress it up, but don't leave anything out, either. If there is any way to square it, he can do it."

"That's what you'd do? Is there any other way?"

"I don't know of any."

Apparently that settled it, for we talked about other things from then on, mostly about the country, how it changed as you climbed from the hot, almost barren thorn-tree terrain where the plane had gone in to the lush, green belt around Ghinda, and finally through the higher, rocky hill country and the cool aridity of the plateau.

About half way to Asmara we met the British convoy. Mike stopped the lead vehicle and told them about the plane and where it was and the

British captain in charge promised to have the people in Massawa send out a guard for it, though the chances were slim that anything worth lifting would still be there.

When we got to Asmara, Dave quit talking and just sat taking everything in. When you come up the Massawa road, you're in Asmara before you know it; you pull up the last grade, swing around a big pile of granite boulders and up over a short rise, and you are on a straight, level boulevard, a row of enormous eucalyptus trees on each side, rock walls behind them, and neat brown and white stucco cottages behind the walls. Then the street splits; to go to Radio Marina you take the right fork, Viale Roma, another wide street, which curves gently up through the main business district, past cafes with wide awnings out front and tables across the broad sidewalk, past a jewelry shop and a fur shop, past a gaudy new glass and chrome Alitalia office, and next door to it a big, dingy gunsmith's shop that is like a museum inside with stuffed animal heads all over the walls. Then you turn right at the red brick cathedral and go five or six blocks through another residential district, a little classier than the first one, the walls around the yards whitewashed and the gates of ornamental iron; if you are in a truck you can see over the walls into neatly landscaped little gardens, but of course we couldn't see those from the jeep. The sidewalks are wide along that street, too, and every thirty or forty meters there is a fat, low, closely-trimmed palm set like a pineapple next to the curb.

We came through the town that day late in the morning and there was little activity on the streets, a few British trucks going here and there, Eritreans on bicycles idling along; against the curb some-

where in every block, a gherry--a two-wheeled, horse-drawn taxi--with a drooping little horse asleep between the shafts and an Eritrean driver dozing at the reins. In the evening there would be taxicabs, beat-up old Fiats and Opels with Italian drivers, for taxicabs were the vehicles of night-time urgency in Asmara.

Dave--I had already stopped thinking of him as Dr. Wright--said nothing as we drove through Asmara that morning, but sat drinking in the town as we went, absorbed completely in what he saw and comparing it, I thought, to the other places he had come through on his way overseas--to Algiers and Tripoli, to Cairo and Dhahran; I think he saw it that first time as it had taken me years to see it, aware all at once that it was Italian-Ethiopian-British, and yet none of these at all. It had been a cluster of half-a-dozen mud huts once and even then must have been not especially African or Ethiopian or even Eritrean but something apart and remote and perhaps unique. In the 1890's the Italians built their own city around the mud huts, but sometime in the next generation the people of Asmara began to think of themselves as Asmaran rather than Italian or Eritrean. World War I didn't change anything, but the war after that reminded them of what they were, though not completely. The Second World War brought Italian soldiers, and later Germans and British and a few Americans, but the people of the town spoke of them all in one breath, all in one tone. To be in Asmara was not necessarily to be Asmaran.

"This is a beautiful city," Dave said at last, as we followed Mike through the main gate of Radio Marina. "Very beautiful. It is like that when you get to know it?"

I thought before I answered. "Yes. More than most cities, I

think. Is any city beautiful when you know it well?"

"How long have you been here, Al?"

"Four years, this rainy season."

I dropped him at the officers' billets, then went up to headquarters to see Crim.

I liked the post commander, Major Wilson. He matched the background at the post, which is what a commander ought to do. Either that or change the background to match himself, and you can have my share of the latter kind.

Wilson had a combat record that read like a movie script--mostly unbelievable. He had been a company commander through most of the Italian campaign, and a casualty off and on through most of the campaign, too, until he'd finally been sent back to the States for medical disability. He'd been decorated with a hatful of medals for fighting the enemy in the line of duty and he'd been court-martialed for fighting his battalion commander on his own time. The latter engagement, according to the rumors that followed Wilson down to Asmara, had cost the battalion commander several broken bones and Wilson a Medal of Honor, and if the rumors were true, I'm willing to bet that Wilson was satisfied with the deal.

Wilson didn't walk with a limp, exactly, but he walked very stiffly, never raising either foot very high and never bending his knees much; as a matter of fact, he had been so badly wounded in the left knee that he couldn't have lifted his left foot three inches off the floor if his life depended on it--I knew that from reading his medical records. He ought to have been retired after the war with a physical disability pension, but he wasn't. I suppose he had talked

some soft-hearted doctor into fixing up his records so he could stay on. I did the talking for him after he came to Asmara, persuading whatever doctor was there at the time that he could fix the records so they would pass a review board whenever Wilson had a physical exam to take. If we did wrong, those of us who connived to keep him on duty, it was a wrong that he bought dearly with every step he took.

Wilson spent his mornings at the office in headquarters, and when he was there nobody disturbed him for any but the most urgent reason. The door was generally locked, Crimmons told me, and when he was "in" at the office, he was officially "out" to everybody. I don't know what he did behind that closed door; some guys said he prayed--that was supposed to be a joke. I imagine he slept, for he rarely went to his quarters before two in the morning and he was always in the office by seven. The afternoons and evenings he spent in the club. It was from there that he ran the post, and it was there that Dave found him that first afternoon.

"I talked to Major Wilson," he said, when he came into the dispensary. "He wants to see you. He said any time, but you'd just as well run over there now."

I started to go and he said, "Al--you don't owe me anything. You understand?"

I didn't say anything. He went on, "Sometimes I talk people into things without really meaning to. I don't always think about what's best for the other guy, you know. Like Albers--he wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for trying to do me a favor. What I mean is--well, you've been here a long time; you like the place, and I don't want to get you in trouble with the post commander. There isn't any

reason for you to get involved."

I said, "I guess I'm already involved, or he wouldn't want to see me. Anyway, don't worry about me--I take pretty good care of old number one."

Wilson was in his usual corner in the lounge of the club, along with the other two afternoon regulars, Captain Bowers, who was the exec officer, and Captain Nelson, the PX and motor officer. We made small talk for a couple of minutes, then Wilson said, "Wright told you his story? What do you think of it? Is it true?"

"I didn't see the wreck, but I think he leveled with me. Who could make up a story like that? Can you cover up for him and Albers?"

"I can, but I want to know more about him first. I like this post, Shannon. So do you. Just the way it is. I can cover up for Wright but I can also use this plane wreck to get rid of him before he ever gets dug in here. And parts of his story make him sound screwy enough so that I think maybe I ought to get rid of him--like the part about wanting to settle down around here after he finishes his tour. Does that strike you as a little too odd?"

"No. Lots of guys on the post would like to live here; half of them are angling for civilian jobs at one time or another while they're here."

"In Asmara. But not in the middle of the desert in some Wog village."

"Well, maybe he doesn't have any idea what the desert's like. That's probably it. He may think there are little towns there something like upstate New York, say, or something like that."

"Upstate New York, my ass. Has he got something on you already?"

He's a screwball. What I've got to decide is whether he's too screwy to keep around or just screwy enough to make a good doc for this place."

"Well, if it were up to me . . ."

"It is, Shannon; it is. What else would I call you over here for? I don't know anything about the man and I don't have time to find out. Whatever I do about the plane has got to be done in the next half hour. Now, you had a chance to size this doc up; which is it--keep him or ship him?"

I looked at Nelson and Bowers; they were both staring hard at the drinks in front of them, apparently never having seen anything quite so interesting before. I thought briefly of the way things had been the afternoon before, there in the dispensary, my feet on the desk, and I remembered Dave's saying that I didn't owe him anything.

"Keep him," I said, and I nodded to all three of them and left. Wilson was already on the phone as I went out the door.

CHAPTER II

The dispensary at Asmara was in awful shape by any standard; I'll admit that. Not that it was my fault--after all, I'm not a medical doctor and there were things I couldn't have done if I'd wanted to. Since the last doctor had gone I had run the place on a day-to-day basis, either taking care of minor complaints myself or sending them downtown to the Italian hospital. If somebody had something seriously wrong with him, like the corporal who gut-shot himself practicing a fast-draw with a .45 automatic, we patched him up as best we could and sent him up to Europe by commercial air.

But that dispensary never had been one of the medical corps' best efforts, according to Mike Clementi, who came in with the first American troops on the heels of the British East African Brigade which took the country from the Italians. Sometimes there was a doctor at the post, sometimes not, and it didn't make a lot of difference either way; if a man was sick or injured he got more or less adequate treatment, but routine medical work--shots, annual physical check-ups, and so forth--just didn't get done.

This wasn't entirely the fault of the various doctors we had had at the post either; some of them could have done more than they did, it's true, but the very nature of the whole operation made any kind of systematic routine medical program difficult. Our strength didn't vary much from year to year, and out of about eighty men and officers assigned to the post, we had to man the radio relay station

around the clock. That took about fifteen men a shift--operators, maintenance men, and supervisors--and three shifts a day, plus one shift off duty; four shifts of men working operations, then, or a total of sixty men. The other twenty worked on the post in administration, supply, etc., and we employed Italian and Eritreans to take up the slack.

We just couldn't get men to come in for routine medical work. The station was short-handed even when everybody showed up and we had never had an operations officer who would hear of letting a man off duty to come in to the post for shots or blood tests or such things, nor had we ever had a commanding officer at the post who failed to back up his operations officer on this. After all, the radio station was our business at Asmara and everything else was secondary to it.

There had been doctors in the four years I had been there who had ordered the men to come in on their off duty time. Whatever your impression of army discipline is, let me tell you that ordering the men in didn't work, not at Asmara. They just didn't come, or most of them didn't, and here again the reason was that the whole post was built around the radio relay station. All a doctor could do if a man didn't show up to take the physical was turn the man in to the orderly room for disciplinary action. But no matter what a man did, it was almost impossible to get anybody on the post to take any kind of action against him as long as he did his job at the station. After all, what could you do? Throw him in the guardhouse--and make the station more short-handed than it already was? Break him--and work with a belligerent, loafing private instead of an efficient non-com? You could get in trouble at Asmara by showing up at the station drunk or by not working

or by doing bad work but those were about the only ways you could; those were the deadly sins. Almost anything else went, as long as you did your work at the station.

I told Dave Wright all this the first day he was on duty, thinking I would save him some trouble. I liked him and I saw no reason to let him go ahead and make the same mistakes others had made before him.

"Somehow, though," he said, "I got the impression from talking to the operations officer last night--what's the fellow's name, Kettar?--that he would be willing to order men to come up for physicals during their time off duty. As a matter of fact, he thinks they are doing that now."

I grinned. "He hasn't been here very long. He's operations officer, but he doesn't actually know what goes on. Nobody likes him, so we don't tell him anything. What happens is this: Mike Clementi schedules the men in for shots and physicals. If they show up, I get the work done by a doctor downtown. If they don't, and damn few do, I make out their records anyway and have the doctor certify them, and then I keep them on file for the Inspector General's annual inspection."

"And the doctor certifies the records, whether he does the work or not? How did you arrange that?"

I shrugged. "There's a lot of serum and other supplies accounted for but not used around here. He gets that. Not a very good system, true, but it works."

"Until somebody gets cholera or typhus. We'll have to do better. What would happen if we worked through Kettar and put enough pressure on the men to force them to keep their appointments? Would it just be a matter of a couple of court martials and a few hours extra

work for the people at the station, or would it be worse than that?"

"Much worse. In six weeks, a bad breakdown in military communications in this part of the world. In three months, a complete investigation by the Chief Signal Officer's office, followed by one hell of a turn-over in post personnel, starting with the commanding officer. You owe Wilson something better than that."

"All right. I won't start anything until I've talked to Mike."

I had a room in the dispensary for my own quarters, outfitted with a bed, a card table, chairs, and a small bar. Across the hall was the dispensary refrigerator and a hot plate. It was comfortable; around the post they called it "Shannon's lounge" and Crim, Clementi, and I used it as a private club. Others used it too, by invitation.

I called Mike and told him to meet us there that evening. I planned on talking to him before Dave got there but Mike was late getting in from the station and he and Dave arrived together.

I made drinks and we chatted a little. Dave hadn't been in that part of the dispensary before.

"You do yourself real well, Al," he said, looking around the room. "It's the non-coms on this post who know how to live."

Mike said, "You want a room like this, Captain? Was that what you wanted to see me about? Shannon can probably manage it."

I said, "Dave thinks we ought to catch up on shots and routine physicals, Mike. He wants to know how we can do it."

Mike smoothed his moustache with a forefinger and looked at the doctor. "You know what's involved, I suppose?"

"Al gave me a good idea, I think. The problem seems to be simple--we can't take the men away from duty to do the work, and they

won't come when they aren't on duty. But they've got to come. I don't want to cause a lot of trouble here on the post, but I won't run the risk of killing somebody--and that's what it would amount to--just to avoid trouble."

"Well, let's see--if I sent a man in from the station, how long would he have to be in here? And does it make any difference when I send him?"

"We could easily run a man through in two hours and we could probably do at least two a day and still keep up with our other work, wouldn't you say, Al?"

I nodded. Mike smiled a little, "All right. I'll get two men a day in to you. I'll pull them off duty if you think it's that important. I can't get them in any special order so you'll just have to get all the records ready and take whatever comes, but we'll get around to all of them sooner or later."

"You're going to pull them off duty?" I asked. "What about Kettar? He'll scream to high heaven, especially since he thinks we're already doing the medical work on their own time."

"It will be a while before he finds out, because I'm going to send the men in off the midnight shift. Between four and eight in the morning we are always pretty well cleaned up out there; it's the only time during the day that we are."

"You mean you want us to give physical exams at four in the goddam morning? What do you think we're running?" I was just started but Mike cut me off.

"I don't care when you give physicals or if you give them at all. I'm just telling you when you'll be able to get the men."

"It's a great idea, Mike," Dave said. "Solves everything.

The men can get their physicals during duty hours, we can get our work done--we don't care when we work, do we, Al?--and Kettar can't say much as long as operations at the station aren't interrupted."

"Oh, he can say plenty, but I'll worry about him when he finds out," Mike said.

So that was how I came to be working practically around the clock instead of sitting with my feet on my desk. Mike gave us a couple of days to get our records ready and then he began sending men in to us at four in the morning, two a day, seven days a week.

We still had a dispensary to run and regular sick call to hold, too. We would generally get the physicals for the night out of the way by seven in the morning, eat breakfast, and come back to hold sick call at eight. That would be out of the way by ten most of the time, and I would catch a couple of winks before lunch. After lunch we both worked on records until the afternoon sick call at four and by the time that was over it would be dinner time. After dinner I might be able to sneak over to the club for a drink or two, but usually I had paper work to do; either way, I tried to get to bed by eleven.

Dave fixed up quarters for himself in the hospital across the street from the dispensary. "Fixed up" is misleading; what he did was push a few boxes to one side in a storeroom and set up a cot in the middle of the floor. Several times I offered to help him clear the place out and move in some furniture and he said, "Good deal. I could sure use it. I don't even have a place to hang my clothes," or something like that, but we never seemed to get around to doing it. He obviously didn't care much.

If someone had told me a month earlier that I'd be keeping that kind of schedule then or ever, he'd have gotten a damn short answer, I can tell you. But I was doing it and not half minding it, either. And I wasn't the only one. In a couple of weeks, Dave had Tesfi, the Eritrean janitor, outfitted in a white jacket and trousers, cleaning medical equipment, running the sterilizer, setting up trays, and filing records--working like a first class medical aide, which I found out later he had been in the Italian colonial army. That was on his civilian employment record, and was why he had been hired in the first place, but I hadn't bothered to read the record and I guess nobody else had until Dave came.

"You'll make him so stuck up that we'll have to hire another janitor or clean the place ourselves," I told Dave.

"I don't care," he said. "I'd just as soon sweep and mop as I would clean and sterilize equipment. And I'd a whole lot rather do it than file records. Look at it this way, you or I could do in two hours what Tesfi used to do around here all day. Now we're getting eight hours of work out of him every day--and I don't know whether you noticed, but he's still doing most of the cleaning."

At first the men at the station bitched pretty hard about the new set-up. We've been getting along without shots, they reasoned, and so why start now? Just something the new doctor thought up to let us know he's around.

But Dave could handle them; instead of pulling the routine stuff about "all for your own good" and "we're really doing you a favor," he would kid around with the men. He didn't care how rough it got, either; anything went, as long as he got done what he intended to do. The way

he went about it, he couldn't have made a living in private practice, but the men liked it.

I got a sample of how he operated on the first night Mike sent patients in to us. One of them was a staff-sergeant trick chief named Truskowski, a tough little bastard who had done a man's work in the coal mines in West Virginia before he was eighteen and who could be mean clear through when the mood struck him; the mood had stung him hard that night. He strode into the dispensary and slammed the door almost in the face of the unhappily alert private who followed him. The private nipped through the door just in time and stood with his hands in his pockets staring around nervously and wishing he were somewhere else, while Truss started in on me.

"Just what in the hell is this, Shannon? I got nothing else to do at four in the goddam morning? Two years nobody's worried if I get a shot, now all of a sudden I got to leave my trick at four in the morning and get a shot. Is this for real? You gonna give me shots?"

Dave said, "We have to give you shots, Sergeant?"

"How come, Captain? Can I just ask you how come you got to do it? Al always fixed it up before, didn't you, Al? Two years I been here, never got a shot. Now I'm gonna bust out with the crud if I don't get a shot?"

His voice had risen considerably and the private shifted nervously from one foot to the other and watched his trick chief out of the corner of his eye.

"It's not that, Sergeant. But look in here," Dave pointed into the examining room at a couple of wooden boxes. "Crates of serum. Some of it just about to go out of date. We've got to use it up. Now

it won't hurt you to help a little, will it?"

"What! That's why you're givin' shots all of a sudden! Well, that's a hell of a reason, Doctor. Why don't you just dump the stuff?"

"We considered that. But Al hasn't been getting much practice with the needle lately and I just got out of medical school, so you know I need the experience. Peel off your shirt."

"You're gonna practice on me? Like hell! Oh, somebody's gonna hear about this."

"Anyway, you weren't quite telling the truth about not having a shot for two years, were you? Didn't you have a shot of penicillin about six months ago?"

Truskowski spun around toward me. "I thought that was off the record, you son of a bitch."

He had contracted gonorrhea a few months before and I sent him downtown for treatment. I hadn't reported him to the orderly room for disciplinary action as I was supposed to do with all cases of venereal disease, but I had put it on his medical records, naturally. The private had quit shifting from foot to foot and was grinning a little.

"He kept it off all the records that matter to you," Dave said, "and you can do him a favor in return, can't you? Who knows when you may lay up with the wrong dame and need another shot?"

Truss was actually blushing and grinning a little, too. "I caught it off the toilet seat."

"A hell of a place to lay a woman," Dave said, "but everybody to his own taste. Come on, I'll tell you how to keep from catching it again while I'm examining you."

"A sure-fire way, Doc?"

"The only sure-fire way is to stay away from women, but I don't suppose there's any use talking to you about that. But I'll tell you the next best way. Come on."

Truss followed him, stopping in the doorway of the examining room long enough to turn around and growl at the private, "What the hell you grinnin' about? You keep messin' around, you ain't gonna have no goddam teeth to grin through."

"I ain't grinnin' at nothing, Sarge. You know me. Hell, I won't say nothing."

"Yeah. Well, don't forget it. I been wantin' to kick hell outta somebody all week."

Dave couldn't blackmail everybody the way he did Truskowski but he could always find some way to get next to a man. He played the buffoon so much that sometimes you couldn't tell whether he was serious or not. He liked posing as a character and a crack-pot. "I'm a farmer too," he told a man one night. "I lived down on the farm until just before I came into the army. Got my diploma through correspondence school. That's one of the reasons I want to get a little practice now. I didn't get a chance to practice much down on the farm--just on animals. And they got so that if they saw me coming with a needle, they would run. All except one chicken; we had this one old rooster who actually liked to get shots, especially tetanus. I guess you could say he got hooked on the stuff. When I ran out of serum he died of withdrawal symptoms before I could get to town for some more. I was going to write it up for the medical journals, but I never got around to it."

There were other sides to Dave, too. He spent half a day peering

into a microscope with a kid who was interested in biology, and no matter how much he had to do, he'd see anybody who had a complaint about his health. I've known him to spend half an hour seriously discussing various treatments for corns with somebody when he knew he'd have to make up that half hour out of his regular sleeping time, but he never seemed to hurry anybody or to get irritated with people who were doing nothing more than what I'd call wasting his time.

We kept an open house going all the time, too. There was always coffee on the hot plate, and soft drinks and PX beer in the refrigerator, and if Dave thought the occasion called for something stronger, he dug into his desk for the appropriate bottle. There was an open shoe-box on the table by the coffee pot with a sign over it that said "Pay for drinks here." I thought it was another of Dave's jokes when he had Tesfi put it there, but we all dipped into it for change whenever we needed more supplies, and the money was always there.

There has never been another dispensary like it, before or since. Dave changed it from the quietest place on the post to one of the busiest in three weeks. Sometimes I would remember the long afternoons and lazy evenings with regret, but mostly I was too busy to think about anything but the business at hand. Even if I did miss the old days a little now and then, I found myself liking things the way they were; I got used to the hustle and bustle around the dispensary and used to being busy, to working on a schedule and to doing more than just enough to get by. And I liked the doctor; everybody did.

Well, almost everybody, I should say, because Major Kettar didn't like him. Kettar didn't like any of us at the post and never would because of what happened to him shortly after he came there. Kettar came

to Asmara, his first overseas assignment, a brand new major and the only field grade officer on the post except for the post commander. All through the war he held some kind of administrative position in the office of the Chief Signal Officer; I'm sure he felt that it was an important assignment, as he felt that the position of Operations Officer at Asmara was an important assignment. Major Kettar, in fact, felt that he was an important man, and he set out to prove it as soon as he took over operations. He frequently worked twelve hours a day at the station, interpreting regulations, changing procedures, scanning records and logs for errors, and checking the work of individual operators; then he spent another hour or two a day in the club telling anybody who would listen how hard he was working and what a mess things were in at the station. And in three weeks he had the station personnel in such a turmoil that Mike Clementi was forced to ask Major Wilson to curb his new operations officer, and Wilson did, though whether he managed it by tact or by force, I never knew.

It must have been a blow to Kettar's pride to realize that he was to be allowed to run his own operations in name only but that the actual responsibility belonged to a mere master sergeant. He took it well, however, and if he bore ill will toward Mike, he concealed it; he advised, he suggested, he explained, he discussed--but he gave Mike no orders.

Kettar was still an irritation around the post, though, demanding to be saluted, harping all the time on the wearing of the uniform, and lecturing everybody about their morals. That was his favorite subject, morals; let him catch a couple of men coming through the main gate with a load on and he'd stand there and deliver his

sermon on how it was ruining their health and what their mothers would think if they saw them that way.

But we could have lived with Kettar and he might have come to fit in with the rest of us on the post if it hadn't been for a thing which happened about six months before Dave came. Major Wilson was called to Germany for a command briefing and Kettar was appointed to the command during the two weeks of Wilson's absence. Things went along normally for the first week; even Kettar wouldn't try to reform a post in two weeks. Toward the end of the week, though, Captain Nelson and a couple of other officers started a rumor--for Kettar's benefit, of course--that Wilson was being called back to the States and placed on medical disability retirement. Kettar took the bait, and all at once it was a case of the fish playing the fisherman; as soon as he was convinced that he was going to be permanent post commander, we got a taste of what he was really like. He put us all in uniform, with neckties during off-duty hours; he had us doing calisthenics in the mornings and standing retreat and close-order drill in the afternoons; he held inspections at any hour of the day or night, confiscating dice, cards, money, and liquor; he kept his clerks busy drawing up charge sheets and writing out company punishment orders--he gloried in it all, and even though we all knew that it was a fool's glory that would end with the week, we were all on the point of mutiny by the time Wilson returned.

To say that Wilson was mad when he got back isn't even a good start; he was furious--and then some. He rescinded all the orders Kettar had posted and returned all the confiscated property. What he said to Kettar was between them, but it couldn't have been as bad as

what he said to Nelson. I heard that little chewing-out because it was delivered in the club at a time when most of the old-timers on the post were there. We were supposed to hear it. I think I mentioned that the old man had been an infantry company commander; I want to say right here that he proved to me how well he knew the language that night. If it had been me getting that chewing, I'd have done just what Nelson did; hang my head and look at the floor.

He finished and everybody sat around not saying anything but sneaking sheepish grins at each other over their drinks for a little while, and then somebody said, "Well, it's all over and things are back to normal, thank God. Let's forget it, huh?"

That got Wilson started again. "It isn't all over. If you had anything but crap for brains, you'd see that. Kettar was trouble enough before but now you've humiliated him--made an ass of him in front of the whole post. You all thought you would have a good laugh at him and maybe you have, but let me tell you that you'd better enjoy it while you can because you may be laughing out of the other side of your yaps. You can bet he's making plans to get even right now."

"Ah, what can he do?" Bowers said. "It was a gag. So it got out of hand--we're all sorry that it did, but it never would have if Kettar was--well, just about anybody but Kettar. If he wants to sulk about it, the hell with him."

"Oh, sure," Wilson snapped. "Sometimes I think you don't have any better sense than Nelson. Let Kettar sulk, huh? For how long--until the IG comes, maybe?"

Once a year an IG inspection team of two officers and two or three non-coms came down from Germany. They were supposed to inspect

the operations of the post and the radio station, check all the records, audit the property and fund books, and hear complaints from the men on the post. That was what they were supposed to do; actually, they came to have a party and we always gave them one, Wilson taking care of the officers and Mike and Crimmons treating the non-coms. They poked around, of course, asking to see the usual records and making notes on the operation of this or that sections--they had to have something to report--but for as long as I had been there the IG team did no real looking. After all, the station was operated pretty near its capacity though it was always under-staffed, and there had not been a single complaint from the personnel since the end of the war. But it was easy to see that Wilson had good reason to think Kettar might change all that.

"One officer bitching good and loud is enough to get the IG started on a real inspection. He could ask some interesting questions--like where is the paper work on those twenty-some Italian trucks you got in the motor pool. You'd have fun answering that, eh, Bowers?"

Bowers sipped his drink and looked uncomfortable.

"Or you, Nelson--what'll you tell him if he wants to know why each man on the post gets a cigarette ration of three packs a day? We got a bunch of extra heavy smokers, maybe? Or do you think he might take that ration as evidence of black-market activity?"

Nobody said anything; Wilson was right and there didn't seem to be anything to add on the subject. We all got along by minding our own business and we all liked it that way. The radio station ran smoothly; we all saw to that. It was our business and there wasn't a man on the post who wouldn't work sixteen hours a day at the station

for as long as Clementi thought it necessary. It was common practice for the operators to work double shifts during busy periods, and I could remember more than once when company clerks and finance men had spent most of their off-duty hours for days at a time logging traffic and even manning automatic circuits. That relay station was the window through which the outside world--that part of it which cared about us--peered in at us and what they saw was a business-like, serious, efficient unit which did its job well and quickly. What went on in the back rooms was out of their sight and we wanted to keep it that way; once a year we entertained the IG inspection team, and what they saw was what they expected to see.

But one sorehead like Kettar could open every door in the place, kick up such a fuss that the IG would have to poke into every corner, and start a clean-up of the back rooms that none of us could survive.

"What we've got to do is butter Kettar up a little. At the conference they told me that they want to start moving the families of eligible servicemen overseas as soon as possible. There are already quite a few of them at the posts in Europe. They want a report from us in the next six months about available housing, local food sources, that kind of thing. Kettar's going to be in charge of gathering the information and writing up the report, and every one of you is going to give him whatever help he needs. Not only that; every damn one of you is going to be as nice to Kettar as he knows how. You aren't to oppose him in anything--understand? This'll be toughest for you, Mike. You're pretty sure to run into trouble. If it's something to do with running the station, I'll have to back you, I guess--but keep it from going so far that I have to take a hand if you can."

We'd left it that way, and from that time until Dave came nobody had run afoul of Kettar. We had even gotten him to the point of drinking a little with us in the club.

But when he found out that Mike was sending men from the night shift in for physicals and shots, he immediately jumped Mike about it. Mike pointed out that operations hadn't been hampered by the schedule, that it was only temporary, and that it was for the good of the men. Kettar finally agreed to allow the shcedule to run the way it was until all the men had been given their examinations and shots, but he wasn't happy about it and he seemed to feel that somehow Dave was the cause of it all.

He made that clear when he came into the dispensary one morning to see Dave. If he was looking for reasons to bitch about the dispensary, he couldn't have timed it better. We had more men than usual on sick call that morning, none of them very sick and all of them still hanging around the waiting room drinking coffee or coke, though Dave had seen the last patient by the time Kettar got there.

Dave came out of the examining room, sat in the swivel chair behind my desk, and swung his feet up on the desk. His stethoscope was around his neck. Picking up the loose end, he held it to his lips like a mike and said, "Captain to galley, Captain to galley. Lay to the bridge with some hot coffee. Over."

"Aye, Sir," said Tesfi, at the coffee urn. It was one of their favorite routines and I have to admit that Tesfi had real talent as a straight man. But the audience didn't appreciate it that morning; we had seen what Tesfi at the coffee urn and Dave with his head turned toward Tesfi, had missed--Kettar, standing in the doorway, taking it

all in.

Dave turned into the silence, saw Kettar in the doorway, and with his feet still on the desk, said, "Welcome aboard, Major."

Kettar tried hard not to look grim. "Could I see you a minute, Doctor, if you're not too busy."

The loafers in the waiting room began to find excuses to leave, racking up their empty bottles or putting their coffee cups on the tray. Dave watched them filing out.

"Can we offer you a cup of coffee, Major? Looks like we'll have plenty this morning."

"No thanks; I've had breakfast. I've got a lot to do yet this morning. What I want to see you about is this night schedule of physicals you've been giving. I understand that it's your idea. I wonder if you know that the men you've been examining are supposed to be on duty at the station."

"Well, yes. I do know that, Major. Is the schedule causing you difficulty at the station? If it is putting you behind in your work out there, we'll have to change it, of course."

"It hasn't so far," Kettar admitted, "but only because Sergeant Clementi has been doing some of the work for the men who come in here."

"He's a good man, that Clementi," Dave volunteered. Kettar didn't comment on that opinion.

"What bothers me, Captain, is that the men are doing something during duty hours that they should be doing on their own time. It's bad for discipline. I only hope there's a good reason for it."

Dave gave him half a dozen good reasons, most of them having to do with the distribution of our work-load around the dispensary; they

sounded good to me, anyway, but I don't think Dave convinced Kettar. I have to admit that from what Kettar had seen of our work load that morning, he had a right to be skeptical. What he wanted was to get Dave to say that we would change the hours of the examinations and do them on the men's own time. They fenced for fifteen minutes before Kettar gave up.

"Well, I have to go. I've got a million things to do yet this morning. I just wanted to talk to you about this. I hope you don't get the idea that I'm trying to run your dispensary for you."

"Not at all, Major."

"I think everyone ought to mind his own business and run his own job, don't you?"

"Just what I was telling Sergeant Shannon only yesterday."

When he had gone, Dave said, "I don't think I made a very big hit with Kettar, do you?"

"Few people do. Don't let it bother you."

"It does bother me, though. I don't want to antagonize him."

I had told Dave about the IG, of course, and about how we were all trying to keep Kettar from doing anything radical.

"What puzzles me is why Mike agreed to stick his neck out like that in the first place," I said. "He's generally pretty careful. I can't figure his angle at all."

"It's simple. He knows the men need physicals and shots," Dave said.

Hell, I thought, he's probably right, though that's the last thing I'd have thought of.

CHAPTER III

I said we were working seven days a week and we did for the first two weeks. By the beginning of the third week we had our schedule running smoothly and had caught up pretty well on the records. We were still giving shots and physicals from four to eight in the morning, but we didn't have much business through the day. And Tesfi, of course, was doing some of the work on the records. In return, Dave and I helped him clean the dispensary--strictly Dave's own idea. The three of us could sweep, dust, and mop the place in about an hour, and once a week we waxed the tile floors.

"You need a rest, Father Alvin," Dave said one morning. "You've been working so much you're getting to look like an old man. You had a nice set-up here and I came in and spoiled it. Put you to work. What a shame."

"If it hurts you so much, I'll take the night off. You've played hell with my social life. Call Mike and tell him we won't see anybody in the morning and I'll take you downtown tonight. Show you the spots. You haven't seen anything but the post and the hospital since you got here."

"I'll take you up on seeing the town, but not until we've got those physicals out of the way. We could take an afternoon off, though, on Sunday. You can drive me down to Ghinda. I'd like to take Louie and Carla down a little something. I never did thank them for bringing us out of that plane wreck. What do you say?"

"Just the kind of break I need. Sure take my mind off my work and give me a little relaxation. I was just thinking a couple of days ago, why don't I take a few hours off and drive down the mountain? Settle my nerves. Dammit, I ought to have known you had an angle when you mentioned me taking some time off. Why don't you go alone?"

I knew he couldn't; you had to leave town with two vehicles and two men in each before they would let you through the roadblock. And Dave hated to drive, anyway.

"Mike's going," he went on, taking no note of what I had said. "He said he'd go if you would. He'll take his weapons carrier."

"I don't suppose it's worth asking, but just out of curiosity, have you got a fourth man to go?"

"Not yet, but we'll find somebody. We'll draft the first man who walks in."

"I wouldn't bet on it; this post is not exactly overrun with people waiting for a chance to drive down to Ghinda. And the first man who shows up this morning will probably be Crimmons, who hasn't been out of town since he got here."

The first man who showed that morning was not Crimmons, however, but Lieutenant Lester, who was in charge of post supply. He was a short, young, wiry character who had taken an ROTC commission, gone on active duty, and been shipped fresh out of quartermaster school to Asmara. Lester hit the post all business and eager to please, and though his branch was quartermaster, Wilson dumped the whole supply function on him--quartermaster, signal, ordnance, medical--the works. Lester took it, putting his name on the line for hundreds of thousands of dollars

worth of equipment without seeing a dime's worth of it. Most of it was probably around somewhere if you could find it; wherever it was, Lester was accountable for it, and if he ever got all that straight he could put in his time worrying about the tons of equipment that was around the post and at the station but unaccounted for--stuff taken over from the Italian army, gear picked up gratis when the air corps had abandoned the airfield a few miles from Asmara in the last feverish days of the war, item after item on which there were no records. And not just little items, either; Wilson drove around in a red, white, and blue 1941 Buick station wagon that had no more official existence than Kilroy. It was the only thing he ever used for escorting visitors from the airport to the post.

When Lester first came to Asmara, he was brisk, straight, and military--always in full and clean uniform, a notable rarity at Radio Marina. That morning, however, after six months at Asmara, the edge was off his briskness and his shoulders sagged a little. "He's a man with a conscience," Crimmons told me once. "Poor little bastard. Instead of using what we need and black-marketing the rest and whooping it up with the proceeds like every other supply man has done around here, he thinks he's got to square all the accounts on the post."

Lester dropped into the chair in front of my desk, sighed, and wished us both a good morning without much enthusiasm.

"What's your complaint, Lieutenant?" Dave asked. "Tired, I assume. Run down. Not sleeping enough. Do you dissipate?"

Lester smiled in spite of himself. "When in the hell would I have time to dissipate? I didn't come to see you in your professional capacity; I came to see if I could get you to help me straighten out

the medical supply records. I suppose you have some?"

"Some records or some supplies? If you mean supplies, we have a whole building full across the street. You'll have to ask Al here whether we have any records. But in the meantime, seriously and as a doctor, I advise you to relax and take some time off or you will be coming to see me in my professional capacity."

"I appreciate your advice, Doctor, but when am I going to relax and take any time off? You don't know what a mess I've got here."

"You can relax now with this," Dave interrupted, fishing a bottle and some glasses out of his desk, "and so you won't feel too self-conscious about drinking on duty, Al and I will have one with you. I rarely drink off duty but I have one now and then during duty hours. And call me Dave. Everybody does, you know. Here, drink this."

Lester glanced nervously toward the door and took the drink uncertainly. "You're sure it's all right?"

"High quality bonded bourbon. I drink it myself."

"No, I meant drinking it here--in the morning like this."

"Oh, absolutely. As your physician, I prescribe it. I always belt a few both before and after breakfast."

I could count on the fingers of one hadn all the drinks he had belted since I had known him, and I didn't believe he had Lester fooled either because it was well known on the post that the doctor rarely drank anything stronger than coffee.

But "Bottoms up," Dave said and we all downed the warm bourbon.

"Well," Dave said, not even grimacing, "that takes care of the relaxation for the time being. Now about the time off--Al and I are going to run down the mountain to Ghinda on Sunday. Mike Clementi is

going with us, but we still need another man. Can we count on you? We'll be leaving shortly after lunch---maybe a little earlier if we can manage it. How about it?"

"Why, I don't know--I thought I'd get started on the medical supplies. No, I'd better stay here. I've got too much to do."

"How about this: in a couple of weeks or so we'll have these routine physicals out of the way and then you and Al can inventory everything on hand, balance out your records, figure out what to do with the leftovers, and when everything is in shape, I'll sign for all the medical equipment and supplies and take them off your hands. Tesfi and I can run the dispensary and Al will help you full time until you get things straightened out, won't you, Al? In the meantime, you can take a little time off, starting Sunday."

Lester protested some more but he was hooked. Dave clinched it when he asked, "Can you handle a sub-machine gun? Mike tells me we may need a good gunner. Personally, I don't think there's anything to be afraid of."

After that there was no holding him. We talked a few minutes making plans for the trip, then somebody came in to see the doctor. Dave took the patient into the examining room and Lester got up to go.

"See you Sunday morning, then, Lieutenant," I said.

"Sure thing. I'll probably talk to you before then." He paused awkwardly. "You'd just as well call me Harry," he said, embarrassed by the breach of military courtesy he was committing but determined to go through with it. "That's my first name."

"Sure, Harry. See you Sunday."

"Okay, Al."

If Mike was happy with our choice of a fourth man, he concealed it well. "Of all the goddam people," he said when I told him. "Why him?"

"He was scientifically selected from a long list of carefully screened applicants. In other words, he was the first guy Dave saw."

"Yeah. Well, Lester can drive a jeep, so he and Dave can go in the jeep and we'll follow in the weapons carrier."

"We'll follow? Why?"

"Because I'm not riding down that mountain with Lester behind me with a loaded Thompson, that's why. You know a better reason?"

And that's the way we left town. Rainy season was getting under way; what the Eritreans called the "little rains" were in full swing, with a shower each morning and sometimes in the afternoon. These didn't last long and the low, dark clouds that brought them broke up into gigantic thunderheads, flowing and shifting all afternoon and finally clearing toward evening. Later, in a week or two, they would break up more slowly, the showers would last longer and be heavier and the sunny interludes become fewer until finally the sun would come up blood red through eastern clouds and the rains would spread from the highlands and down into the desert and even the desert would turn green and suck greedily at the water and come alive.

Already the little rains had had their effect on the brown highlands around Asmara, and a faint green cast lay over the plateau. Down the mountain a few miles the giant prickly pear cactuses were showing tiny yellow blossoms; in six weeks the fruit, bigger than a goose egg, would be ripe and the roadside would swarm with Eritreans picking the ripe fruit. They picked it with tin cans nailed to the ends of long

poles, reaching over the spikes of the cactus and clapping the can over the ripe pear, then twisting the can to break off the pear and catch it in a single motion. For three weeks then, as long as the fruit held out, boys and women would hawk the seedy, pulpy, sweet pears in the streets and alleys of Asmara. I would hear their high-pitched voices every morning over the wall by the dispensary, piercing and insistent: "Fegahdeenya, feegahdeenya, FEE-gahdeen-YA!"

It was a beautiful afternoon of sunshine, clouds, and once a little rain, of clear, moist air and wild mountains and valleys, some of them full of clouds like cotton in a box. I was glad I had come.

Louie and Carla were sitting at one of the tables on the veranda when we got there; she was leafing idly through an old Italian magazine and he obviously had been dozing but his little eyes popped open when he saw the cartons of cigarettes and cans of coffee Dave brought him.

"You didn't need to do that, Doc."

"Just something for helping us out of the wreck," Dave said.

"How's business?"

"You're lookin' at it--ain't it awful? The British don't even run regular convoys on Sunday any more. Catch a Limey patrol now and then--couple of trucks, that's all. You wanna buy the joint?"

"If you can't make money out of it, what would I want with it?"

Dave had some lipstick and other junk for Carla, and a big bundle of American magazines; he must have bought one of each kind they had in the PX. She didn't gush over the things, but you could see she was pleased with them, especially the magazines.

Louie opened some of his private wine and we sat on the ver-

anda chatting. He was eager for news from Asmara, especially news about the UN commission that was in the country trying to decide what to do with it. I didn't know anything about it but Mike did. He thought they would eventually divide Eritrea, giving the highlands and the coastal strip to Ethiopia and the northern desert to the Sudan.

"It'll be dog eat dog if that happens," Louie said. "The Ethiopians can't control the country five miles out of Addis Ababa. What they gonna be able to do over here?"

"It's time you got out, Louie. You ought to go back to Italy."

"Not me. I'll stick it out. I wish I had some place to send Carla, though."

Mike looked through the door into the cafe where Carla had gone for more wine. Both Dave and Harry were helping her. "That problem might take care of itself, Louie, in time," he said.

The old man smiled and nodded. "It just might, at that."

After a couple of hours Mike thought we ought to leave in order to get a good start up the mountain before dark. Both Louie and Carla were sorry to see us go so we promised to come back, maybe the following Sunday. I noticed that Harry didn't mention that he might have too much work to do.

Harry thought he had drunk too much wine to drive back up the winding road, so I drove the jeep and he rode with me. He was acting ten years younger than he had a few days before, nearer his real age, fairly bubbling over with the wine and the good cool air and the sense of having escaped at last, even temporarily, from the responsibility of his job. He wanted to talk and I didn't mind listening, nodding and putting in a word now and then to keep him going.

He had his wife on his mind, his wife and his mother. His father was dead--worked himself to death, according to Harry, putting together a pretty good wholesale grocery business. After his father's death Harry was supposed to take over the business. He had been in his last year of college then, and his tour of active duty in the army came as a surprise to both his mother and his wife. His mother still owned a large block of the business and both she and his wife expected him to return to the fold when his tour was done, pull the business together, and spend the rest of his life making money.

It was a pretty standard story except for the money in the family; all the guys in the regular army who are running from mothers or wives or other women would make a sizeable striking force. Behind every good man you'll find a good woman.

"If I could just get Louise away from Mother," Harry said, "things would be all right. If she'd come over here, see this country, get away from the damned grocery business. But she won't." He paused, then went on bitterly. "Before we were married, when we first started going together in college, we used to talk about traveling, going around the world, taking maybe a year or two to do it, you know. Then we thought I might take a job with the diplomatic service overseas. Well, all that changed in a hurry when Mother got a hold on her."

"Any chance you can get her to come over here?"

"I keep trying." He thought a minute, and said, "What makes it so damn difficult is I love her. I really do, Al. I guess she's the only person I ever have really loved. I liked my father but I actually never knew him well enough to love him--he was either gone or so busy I couldn't get near him. And I don't think anybody could love my

mother. That's a hell of a thing to say, isn't it? But it's true. You can respect her, admire her in some ways; I suppose in her day lots of men wanted her. But I don't see how anybody could love her."

He lapsed into moody silence, his exhilaration gone, and I was satisfied not to disturb him. He had already involved me more than I liked by telling me his problems and I felt a twinge of resentment. They were, after all, his own and none of mine. At the same time I felt sorry for him. He had no close friends on the post, no outlet for his feelings, no means of escape from anything, and when I thought of him struggling along with the burden that had been shoved on him at Asmara and carrying this other thing in his mind all the time, I was surprised that he hadn't reached the breaking point long before. Was it an accident, I wondered, that Dave had talked Harry into going to Ghinda with us, or had Dave seen with some special kind of insight that Harry needed to go somewhere and do something?

The sun dropped and around us the darkness came with the amazing swiftness I never got used to as long as I was in those mountains. We still were about twenty miles from Asmara, climbing a very steep grade in a series of tight switchbacks that I had hoped to be through before dark. Mike pulled up tight on my tail and hung there through curve after curve, sweeping through them as easily with the wide, clumsy weapons carrier as I did with the jeep. I wondered whether Dave realized that he was getting a sample of some first class driving.

When we got above the switchbacks and on a fairly long tableland with only a few gentle curves and occasional mild grades, Mike dropped back a couple of hundred feet. There were a few stars in the sky, but no moon and it was pitchy black around the holes stabbed in

the darkness by the headlights. The road is wide through there, with wide ditches and level ground on either side, now and then broken by an outcropping of granite boulders.

I saw the stuff in the road long before we reached it. The shifta who had put it there was an amateur or he hadn't had much time, for it was a miserable attempt at a roadblock--a few football sized rocks and some scraps of wood and cactus; not a log in the lot big enough to stop a jeep though some of the rocks could have done damage to the underside of a fast-moving vehicle. I slowed down and shifted to low gear, allowing Mike time to come up close behind me, then I leaned out and motioned him forward, gunning the jeep at the same time. The ditch on the right side of the road was broad and shallow and when we got close enough so I could see that it wasn't blocked, I swung down into it, past the roadblock, and up onto the road on the other side. The gravel in the ditch was wet from recent rain and we skidded a little as we came up the shoulder but we kept going.

I didn't hear the first shot, but I saw the bullet hit the asphalt in front of us and heard it spang off across the plains. I jammed the jeep into second and kept going. There were two shots, then a pause, then a string of four or five more. The lights of the weapons carrier kept coming behind me and I didn't slow down until we were well out of rifle range and around a curve.

Harry had hung grimly onto his seat through the ditch and afterward, and he didn't say anything until we were a ways up the road, then he said, "My God, what was that? Was that shiftas, Al? Did you hear those shots? They almost got us. God, that was close."

He had forgotten about the sub-machine guns in the back seat

and I figured that was just as well.

Mike pulled in tight behind me when I stopped and we gave the vehicles a quick check with flashlights. The jeep hadn't been hit but there were three hits on the weapons carrier; two slugs had gone through the canvas tarpaulin and the other had punched a ragged hole in the running board on Dave's side. None of them had done any important damage so we went on.

We reported the incident to the British at their roadblock on the edge of Asmara, and then headed to the club for a drink. Wilson, Bowers, and Nelson were there in their usual corner so the four of us went over and sat with them while Mike told them what had happened.

Kettar came over from the bar and listened in. He said, "Shooting at American vehicles, by God! They're going just too far. What were you doing in the middle of the night out on the road anyway?"

"An hour after sundown is not exactly the middle of the night," Wilson said. "And it's likely they didn't know they were firing at American vehicles. They have never stopped any of our vehicles, though that may just be luck. In the dark like that, though, it would be easy to mistake an American truck for a British one. What do you think, Mike?"

"I figure they saw our lights coming up that bunch of switchbacks just below there, thought it was a Limey patrol, and decided to shoot it up just for the hell of it. There weren't many of them, probably not more than four or five, judging from the way the shots were grouped, and it took some of them a while to decide to fire. I'd guess that they thought we were Limeys, then saw we were Americans, and some trigger-happy klunk decided to have his fun anyway and started

them all going."

"Well, do you think we ought to restrict out of town travel for the men on the post? You know the country better than I do."

"I hate to see it, Major. The men who have civilian vehicles ought to go with the British convoy if they use the Massawa road, but I think the rules we have now about military vehicles are stiff enough. If you put more restrictions on, they won't affect anybody but the few guys who go hunting, and they can generally take care of themselves anyway. And most of them go north through Cheren. There hasn't been much shifta activity on the Cheren road for a long time."

"Well, I think we ought to keep everybody in town," Kettar said gratuitously. "We are responsible for the safety of our men; let's not forget that. It's nice to be good guys and let them do as they please, but not if somebody gets shot for it. The shiftas will probably get more and more active all the time the UN commission is here. And shorthanded as we are at the station, I couldn't afford to lose even one man."

Wilson ignored him but Mike said, "It is possible that the shiftas will give more trouble while the commission is here, in order to discredit the British administration. I'll agree that it's something to consider."

"We'll consider it when it happens, then," Wilson said. "Right now I see no reason to increase our precautions. But Nelson, you tell your motor sergeant that when the men check out vehicles for hunting, they'll need to clear through Crimmons if they want to go anywhere but down the Cheren road. Who's ready for another drink?"

I passed; it was getting late and I wanted to catch at least

a couple of hours of sleep before the men came in for physicals.

Dave hadn't been drinking and he got up to go as I did.

"I'll probably be going down to Ghinda again next week, Major," he said to Wilson. "Do you want me to clear with the first sergeant before I go?"

"Just leave word that you're going so that we'll know where to start looking if you don't come back. And try to leave early enough so you can be back before dark. I know it isn't your fault, Doc, but things have a way of happening to you. The British aren't too happy anyway about people coming and going through their roadblock at night."

"I won't go through the roadblock at all if you think it would be better not to."

"Oh, I know that. I know it. There are probably half a dozen ways of getting on the Massawa road without going through the roadblock, and that damned Clementi knows every one of them. No, go through the roadblock, but do it in daylight if you can."

CHAPTER IV

I suppose that rainy season was as long as any other, but it went by a lot faster for me. We finished the round of shots and physicals and then went to work on the medical supply records.

The stuff in the dispensary wasn't in bad shape; most of the equipment there was in use or usable and I had a good idea of what was there so it was mostly a matter of listing it, finding the original paperwork on it, and making out issues slips for Dave to sign.

The hospital, though, was a different matter; it was not a large building but what was there was crammed with equipment and supplies. There was a wardroom and a one-patient room on the main floor, along with an examining-operating-emergency room and another room probably intended as a lab; the basement was divided into several storerooms and there was junk in every one of them.

Harry and I poked around in the place all one morning trying to get an idea of what we were up against. By noon I was dusty and disgusted. We had pushed and tugged and moved boxes until I was sweating even in the cool air of the basement. We had uncovered medicine and drugs still cased from as early as 1941. There was lab equipment of all sorts, old and new, whole and in pieces, some of it identifiable, and some of it defying identification, some of it labeled in English or Italian or Arabic, some of it without labels.

"Well," I said as we took a breather before lunch, "You've seen it. What do you think?"

"A real mess," Harry said.

"I say the hell with it. We'll go over your records, find out what the post is charged with, dig out what we can find, and haul the rest to the dump. And even that will take more time than I want to spend on it."

"We can't do that, Al," Harry protested. "That stuff should be inventoried and put on record as part of the post property."

"Sure. I should be richer and a damn sight better looking, too. I repeat: the hell with it. It would take six months to straighten this place out."

But Harry had been to supply school; he knew the rules. So after lunch we began by clearing out the large room on the main floor completely, and then we went through all the records of supplies and equipment we were supposed to have on hand. We had already balanced out some of the records with the stuff we had in the dispensary; our first job in the hospital was to try to find enough of the right kind of equipment and supplies among the junk in the hospital to satisfy the rest of the issue slips Harry held.

It was no easy job because Harry insisted on absolute accuracy. He didn't know the difference between a catheter tube and a sphygmomanometer but he found an old training manual that described the clinical and hospital equipment in use in the army medical corps and he referred to the book all the time we were working through the day and apparently studied it at night, so that I couldn't slip much over on him.

When we had assembled everything for which we were accountable in the main floor of the little hospital, we still had about three

truck-loads of stuff left in the basement. There were pieces of Italian equipment that nobody had bothered to put on paper; boxes of dressings, splints, tourniquets, plasters, and the like; and crate after crate of medicines and drugs.

Harry thought we ought to inventory all of it, put it on record, then start disposing of it according to the regulations; turn it in, issue it to somebody, or destroy it if it were no longer usable. I argued that we ought to just get rid of the stuff, give it away or dump it. Why borrow work?

"Nobody will ever have any way to check it, Harry," I told him. "You've surely got more important things to do than play around all summer with that junk. If it's the wasting of it that bothers you, forget it; I'll haul it down to the Ospedale Regina and let Dr. Delucca go through it. You can bet that if there's anything salvageable in it, he'll use it."

"You don't understand, Al. I'm responsible for that stuff. I'm the supply officer. It's my job; it's what I take my pay for. I don't give a damn whether anybody ever knows what becomes of the stuff. What I care about is that as long as I have the responsibility for it, I do what I'm supposed to do."

He wouldn't give in and neither would I and finally we involved Dave in the argument. Dave had stayed away from the hospital while we were working there, coming over only to identify something for us when we were stuck or to sign for the property that Harry wanted to issue to him, but I put the problem to him one morning when we were taking our coffee break.

He came over to the hospital then and spent the rest of the

morning going over the stuff with us. He decided that most of it could be used but that we probably wouldn't find any use for much of it there on the post.

"Look here," he said, kicking a box, "here's a gross of tubes of opthalmic ointment. There are three more gross of the same stuff over there. It's all usable, but in a year I won't prescribe a dozen tubes of it. In theory it's as good as gold, but in fact it's useless to us. But if you put it on paper, we've got to keep it around. Let me go through it, decide what we can use, and give the rest away."

Harry was against that. He admitted that we had already done some extensive trading and juggling with the records.

"But that was something we had to do," he said. "There wasn't any other way. Here we have another--the way the regulations prescribe. And that's the way we'll do it. If you don't want to help, all right. I'll do it myself, but at least I'll do it right."

They argued about it through dinner that evening and then continued the argument in the club after dinner. Major Wilson finally settled the argument. He called the three of us over to his table and asked Harry how we were coming with the medical supply records.

"Well, the records are in good shape but we have a surplus that's going to take a month or six weeks to handle."

"You don't have a month or six weeks. You've got a week from tomorrow. I got word that the IG will be here in a week. I can keep him away from a certain amount of stuff because he only has to spot check some things, but he's got to make detailed checks into some areas and I've decided to turn him loose on medical and signal supply records if you've got them in shape. How about it?"

"What can I do with the surplus? If he looks in the hospital, he's sure to see it. It's all over the place and none of it is on record."

"Hide it. Rent a building downtown and haul it down there. When he's gone, you can do what you want with it."

Harry didn't like it, but it solved our problem, or at least mine, for the time being.

The Inspector General's team came in the next week and Wilson arranged for them to stay at the CIAAO Hotel in downtown Asmara, as he always had. There was a party at the CIAAO that night and the inspecting party didn't show up until well after lunch the next day, all of them looking as though they would like to get the inspection over with and get back to the hotel.

They may have been the most efficient IG team on record; by evening they had audited the books at post finance, gone through the administrative records, and inspected the PX, the motor pool, and the mess hall. I noticed that nobody went into the warehouse behind the PX and I don't suppose anybody took a look at the shed across the parking lot in the motor pool; it was full of old Italian trucks that had no more official business on that post than a Chinese corporal.

There was a party at the club that night and the next day the officers of the IG party didn't show on the post until late in the afternoon, but a couple of heavy-eyed non-coms came up and checked out post supply, concentrating mostly on signal and medical supply records and finding very little wrong with them.

After that the whole IG team, escorted by Wilson and Mike Clementi and accompanied by an Italian cook and a couple of bus boys

from the mess hall, went on a three-day hunting trip. The trip was a success even though they didn't get much game, for it was too wet to go where the hunting was good. But they got a boar and some birds and they could all say they had been hunting in Africa, and when they got back to the post, they were all ready to leave for Germany and the big Annual IG Inspection was over.

We made one more trip down to Ghinda during that rainy season, managing to get back to Asmara before dark. Things were normal there; Louie was napping on the veranda when we pulled up. He complained about business, the shiftas, and the British, in that order. Carla showed us her vegetable garden and loaded us down with truck of all kinds from it, though what she thought we were going to do with it, I don't know.

We ate with them--clear soup, green salad, pasta, roast pork, and cold sugared papaya--a real feast that Carla had prepared in the hope that we would be down.

"Last week I fixed a special casserole for you and then you didn't come. With lamb and tomatoes and little biscuit on top. I read it in a magazine you brought me," she said.

"I'm sorry we missed it," Dave said. "I'll bet it was good."

"Gawd-awful," Louie growled. "Tomatoes in it didn't get done and the biscuit was doughy. I told her before she baked it, it ain't gonna be fit to eat. Whoever wrote that recipe never cooked anything with raw tomatoes. But she had to try it because she read it in one of them goddam magazines."

"I don't think I baked it long enough. The magazine can't help that. And don't say so many goddams. It isn't good English."

"For ragazzine, no. For old men, it's okay, especially if they got to put up with gabby granddaughters."

"The men I read about don't say it," Carla said, tossing her head and smiling saucily at the old man. "And they don't call eighteen year old ladies 'little girls,' either."

Louie snorted. "See what you done with your damn magazines," he said to Dave.

When it was time for us to go, Louie said, "I got to come up to Asmara one of these days. Maybe I'll see you guys. Can I get on the post if I come out to Radio Marina?"

We told him that he could and when Dave discovered that Louie was coming up in order to see a doctor, he said, "Come on out to the post, Louie, and I'll examine you. I can't give you any medicine but if you need any I can write a prescription for it. Won't cost you anything."

Louie protested that we were too busy and that he didn't want to impose on Dave, but it was plain that he had been hoping to be asked and he finally promised that if he came at all he would let Dave look at him. Carla was delighted at the prospect of a trip to Asmara and also genuinely concerned about the old man's health. He had pains in his chest, she said, and had to lie down until they went away. Angina pectoris, I thought. Dave was thinking the same thing and he kept the pressure on until Louie agreed to come the following week.

They came up with the afternoon convoy in the middle of the week after the IG team left and stayed overnight. Louie came out to the post the next morning and Dave examined him.

Dave decided that Louie had angina pectoris, all right, and

ought to have an ECG as soon as possible. We didn't have the equipment to do it there on post and Louie wouldn't stay over for another day so that it could be done downtown though Dave finally wrung a promise from him to have it done as soon as possible.

He also wrote out a prescription for some nitro tablets, told Louie how to take them and what to expect from them, and talked to him about losing some weight.

"How bad is his heart?" I asked when Louie had gone.

"Bad," Dave said. "He had the first angina pains at least three years ago and he's had several attacks since. He could have gone during any one of them. And he's probably got a congestive heart failure; I can't tell until I see the ECG."

"If he'd take it easy--maybe lay off the booze--he might make it for a long time yet, huh?"

"I doubt it, Al. I don't like to guess about it until I've seen the graph and done some lab tests, but off hand I'd say it's an accident that he's still alive."

"Did you tell him that?"

"Not exactly; I wanted to see the ECG first. But I'm sure he knows he hasn't all the time in the world. I doubt that I can get him to take the ECG; I think he'll just let things slide. I wish we had the equipment here. There might be ways to stretch his time a little if I knew for sure what he had left to work with."

"Are you going to tell Carla?"

"Not until I've talked to Louie again. Maybe he'll tell her."

"She'll take it hard. He's the only family she's got."

"Well, she'll have to face it. I guess she'll find a way to

take care of herself."

In the weeks that followed, Louie and Carla came up frequently, but Louie never did get the ECG, though he kept promising Dave to do it.

They would come up in the afternoon and go back with the convoy the following morning, and though Louie complained that the expense was ruining him, I noticed that he enjoyed himself. Carla was crazy about movies and Dave would usually take her to a movie there on the post if there happened to be one. Sometimes when we hadn't a movie there, they would go downtown to the Italian theater if there was an American picture showing; if the movie downtown was an Italian picture, though, Carla wouldn't go.

Harry generally went with them, so I ended up in the club with old Louie, who hated movies about as much as I do. Now and then Mike would drop over and drink with us if he could get away from the station.

Louie had been around plenty and he had some great stories to tell about the days he had spent running booze into the States from Canada, and when that went to hell, how he had come to East Africa in the thirties when it looked like the Italians had something going there.

Sometimes, though, he would get a skinful before the evening was over, and I would have to listen to the sad parts of his life and all the troubles he had been through and the mistakes he had made, which was no treat for me; I have my own troubles and I've made a few mistakes, too, and if they don't amount to much, all right, but they're all I need.

But I listened. I liked the old man and didn't want to hurt his feelings. And he was fun to drink with when he hadn't had too much; there wasn't a scrap of self-pity in him when he was sober. So

I listened to him tell how he had gotten this girl pregnant in Milan when he was "just a punk" and how he had gone down to Livorno and then to sea before the baby was even born. During World War I he had sailed on a Canadian ship and finally jumped ship in Montreal and sneaked into the States.

"That's where I really loused up," he told me once. "If I'd stayed clean I could've been a Canadian subject, but I couldn't wait. I could've stayed at sea and made good dough after the war as a steward on the big liners. But it was too slow for me. I got down to Chicago and got to running booze and making plenty of fast money. I used to think I'd send for my wife but I never did. Anyway, it wouldn't have been any good; I was hot all the time and one jump ahead of the feds."

He went back to Italy when things went bad in the bootlegging business but ended up in East Africa when he found out that his wife and daughter were in Asmara. The wife was dead by the time Louie got to Asmara, but the daughter was there, making a living as a cabaret girl.

"I wish you coulda seen her, Al. God, she was somethin' to look at. Men went nuts over her, they couldn't help it--and Jesus, did she know it. She made more in that cabaret than the guy who owned the joint. But she got pregnant with Carla--just about the time the war started, that was--an' she had consumption or some damn thing, an' together they killed her. She wouldn't have anything to do with me from the start. Half the time she didn't even believe I was her old man. But when she got bad sick, just before Carla was born, she made me promise I would take care of the kid if she lived long enough to have it. She just barely made it.

"I promised and I did it, Al, and so far it's the only thing I done that I ain't messed up. I've took as good a care of her as I know how, up to now. It's hard to see which way to go from here on in, though, with my ticker goin' bad and maybe gonna deal me outa the game and her grown up like she is and lookin' more like her mother every day."

It was a messy little story. I heard it in snatches and bits, not like I've told it here but a little at a time, when Louie was drunk and got started on it. It made me uncomfortable to hear it; I had the feeling all the time that he was leading up to asking me to look after Carla if he died. If he was, he never got quite drunk enough to do it or else he figured he had the wrong man, which he had.

Most of the time, though, Louie was good company, and sometimes I looked forward to seeing him.

I was busy all the time, too. Things didn't slow up much even after we got the physicals out of the way and the supply records in order. As time went by, I saw that wherever Dave Wright was, there was going to be some action of some kind.

First it was the lab; he kept Tesfi and me jumping all one week setting it up, cleaning things, and learning to run simple lab tests.

Just about the time we caught our breaths from that, Dave started a clinic for civilian employees on the post, with a regular schedule, four afternoons a week. Tesfi met each patient in the waiting room, listened to his complaint and questioned him in Amheric, Tigre, Arabic, or Italian, took his temperature if that was indicated, and got him ready to meet the doctor.

Things were slow at the clinic the first week, but when word

got around, business picked up; by the end of the second week, we were seeing as many civilian patients as we were Americans. Dave and Tesfi did most of the work, but somebody had to take care of the regular affairs of the dispensary while they were busy with the civilians--somebody being me.

Dave talked Harry out of the key to the building where the surplus supplies were stored, and one evening we moved all the supplies back into the basement of the hospital, three truck loads, with nobody to help us but Tesfi. Harry came up while we were unloading the last load.

"What in the hell are you doing?" he asked. "I didn't know you were going to move that stuff back. What do you want with it here?"

"You can stop paying rent on that building now, Harry."

"It didn't cost much. What are you going to do with the stuff?"

"Use some of it. You can do what you want with what I can't use. You have a whole year before the IG comes again."

"Use it for what? I thought you said you couldn't use it. Say, you aren't going to use it on civilians, are you? You can't do that; why, it's the same as selling it on the black market."

"I'm not selling it. I'm giving it to them."

The argued about it, but the argument was just a matter of form; Harry was whipped and he knew it. As the supply officer of the post, of course, he had the last word where supplies were involved, but what he wanted to do was talk Dave into following the regulations and he couldn't do that because Dave just didn't give a damn about regulations. So we not only had a civilian clinic going, but we also had a good stock of supplies to operate it with.

Once it was in operation, though, the clinic didn't take much of our time; even with our regular work and the extra time he spent in the little lab we had fixed up, Dave had time on his hands, something he couldn't stand. He couldn't loaf; that was his great weakness. He wasn't against loafing in principle--nothing like that. As a matter of fact, he talked the greatest job of loafing you ever heard and to listen to him sometimes, you would think he never intended to do anything but sit around with a cup of coffee in his hand and watch the rest of the world go by--but try to get him to do it! After the morning sick call was out of the way, we'd take a coffee break there in the waiting room. Tesfi and I would pour coffee for ourselves and for Mike and Harry or maybe some of the guys who had come on sick call, or just about anybody who happened to be up that way on that particular morning. Dave would come in and pour a cup, too, and sit down, swing his feet up on his desk, sigh, light a cigarette, and sigh again; you'd think he was dug in for the rest of the morning. But two minutes later he'd remember that he had to do something in the lab, or that he had to see somebody in post headquarters, or in the PX, or that so and so was waiting for a phone call, and off he'd go. He never wasted the coffee, though; he'd finish it eventually a gulp at a time as he happened by through the day, hot or cold, fresh or stale--it was all the same to him.

I didn't care how much running Dave did, except that half the time he dragged me along with him. He got to going down to the Ospedale Regina several times a week and I had to drive for him; sometimes we had patients there from the post or sometimes Dave needed lab work done that we couldn't do in the dispensary, but most of the time he just went

down to visit and to learn what he could about the diseases peculiar to our part of Africa. He kept notes on everything he saw at the Regina, too, and I had to type all those up for him.

We made several trips through the native quarter of the town, the part of town we at the post called "The Bosh" because that was as near as we could come to the Eritrean word for it. I'd been there before but I didn't mind going there with Dave because it was worth going to. You ran into it three blocks off the Viale Roma on the side of town opposite Radio Marina. There was a big plaza surrounded by stalls and little shops, a kind of bazaar, where you could buy white muslin for breeches, and horse-tail fly-switchers, blankets and woven twine beds, civet musk and kohl for love-making, knives and spear-heads for fighting, and tej brandy to give you the courage to do either one.

Three days a week the plaza would be filled with tents and people and donkeys and comels; you'd have to weave your way through on foot among the goods for sale--salt, matches, dhurra, strings of hot peppers to put a little body into the stew--and every tent with a few scrawny chickens tied by one leg with a string, the other end of the string generally in the charge of a three or four year old Eritrean who, like as not, was doing what any other kid would do, letting the chickens peck and wander out to the very end of their strings, then hauling them in short, chicken squawking and skidding along, kid laughing and shouting at the kids in the next tent, mama when she wasn't too busy whacking him a light clout on the head--it was all in Tigre, but you didn't have to know the words to figure out what she was saying: "I told you, don't pull that chicken! Think

anybody's going to buy a chicken that's been pulled all over the square? Now give it a little string. Not so much! It's in the dhurra! Haul it back! Haul it back!"

On the side of the square nearest the main street there would be the goods brought for sale mostly to Italians and Arabic traders--cow and leopard hides, a little ivory, maybe, if some tribe up on the Sudanese border had been lucky, sometimes a little gold which I always wanted and was afraid to buy because I was never sure that it was really gold, and everywhere the fresh-dressed carcasses of sheep and goats strung up on poles hung between wooden tripods, and of chickens and guinea hens.

That was the Bosh I knew, there around the plaza. Behind the plaza and fanning out away from the rest of the town across a flat lava plain and into low red hills was the rest of the Bosh, a maze of flat-roofed, whitewashed, square mud houses on twisting streets just wide enough for two donkeys to pass. Three quarters of the population of Asmara, about 15,000 people, lived there, but I never had been very far into that part of the Bosh; few white men had.

But Dave went there, taking Tesfi with him while I kept the dispensary. He and Tesfi spent a lot of time there during that rainy season. Dave met the Coptic patriarch, attended services at the Coptic church, was a guest at the wedding of one of Tesfi's relatives, delivered a child or two, and marched in a funeral procession.

"You've gone native," I told him. "The guys around the post call you the mayor of the Bosh. You'll be living down there, first thing you know."

"Well, I could think of worse places. Maybe I'll start a

practice there when I get out of the army."

"You're not serious?"

"No. Not until I've seen the rest of the country. I want to get down into the lowlands. It's too cold up here at night. And the Copts are too religious for me. Don't you know of a nice, friendly tribe of pagans somewhere?"

"We'll take a look when the rains are over. Do a little hunting down in the desert. But you won't like it. Not to live in. I can tell you that before we go there."

"Why? Too hot? I don't mind the heat. I can stand it all year round. It's winter I hate. The heat won't bother me."

"I wasn't thinking about that--it's the lack of anything to do that will drive you off. You've got to be moving all the time--got to have something going on. And there isn't much going on in the middle of a Wog village in the desert. You'd go nuts in a week."

He just grinned.

CHAPTER V

We went hunting when the rainy season was over and the lowlands near the escarpment were dry enough so that we could cross them in trucks without getting stuck. Several of the men at Asmara hunted on their days off and I hunted quite a bit myself when I first went there, but I gradually gave it up; I guess it was just too much trouble. I can't say that I was eager to take it up again, either, but Dave wanted to go so badly that it was less trouble to go than to argue with him.

We arranged for an Italian doctor to take care of the dispensary for us and Mike took three days off from the station. Harry could get off any time he was willing to take off.

There had been more shifta trouble on the Massawa road so we decided to go north out of Asmara, through Cheren and down the mountains into the southern edge of the Sudanese desert. We assembled the gear at the dispensary on Thursday night, and had a quick breakfast of coffee and hard Italian rolls, loaded the gear, and were off before daylight Friday morning.

From the moment Dave turned me out in the cold pre-dawn I regretted promising to go. I remembered the twisting road between Asmara and Cheren, worse in some places than the Massawa road, and I thought of the cold wind, damp at that time of the year with fog out of the valleys early in the morning, and then the heat on the plains below Cheren and how the change in altitude always gave me a headache.

By the time I'd been up half an hour nothing could please me; I drank the coffee, sulked, and helped load the gear in tight-lipped silence, furious at having promised to go at all. I hoped we would be turned back at the roadblock on the north edge of Asmara.

But a few words from Mike to the Eritrean constable at the roadblock got us through that and I sat brooding beside Mike as we slid over the rim of the escarpment and down the twisting road. I had balked at driving the jeep, finding all kinds of reasons for not driving it, for waiting until daylight, for putting off the trip for another week--until finally Harry had crawled behind the wheel and I had gotten sulkily into the weapons carrier with Mike.

We rode along in silence. I was busy feeling sorry for myself and wishing I were back in my warm bed and Mike was giving all his attention to the steep grade, braking, shifting, turning, driving with the same easy rhythm he used when he spoke Italian--or even English when the subject was right.

The road at first was a long series of turns, all of them down grade, and Clementi seemed to know each one and to be able to swing into it on just the right arc so that he wouldn't overshoot or come up too tight and have to crowd or drift to stay in the turn. Harry in the jeep behind us was having trouble keeping up with us even though all he had to do was follow us, gauging his speed from ours.

And it was cold, colder than I'd remembered. The wind at forty-five miles an hour whistled through the open weapons carrier and knifed through my field jacket and light khaki pants, and I sat and silently cursed my stupidity in not wearing something heavier. I wanted to dig out some of the blankets from the back of the truck and I would have

but Mike was no more warmly dressed than I was and he seemed to be comfortable; if he could take it, I could. He's driving, though, I thought. That's what keeps him warm. Damn him. Damn them all. Especially Dave. If it weren't for him I wouldn't be out here on the side of the damn mountain freezing in the middle of the night.

I don't know when I've felt sorrier for myself.

The air lost its bite as we dropped down the mountain, though, and pretty soon the sun came up, weak at first, then stronger on the right side of my face until I was warm enough to unzip the field jacket, and I began to feel better.

An hour or so after sunup we came out of the hills temporarily into gently rolling country, though there were rocky peaks behind and on both sides of us. Harry dropped behind in the jeep so Mike pulled over to give him a chance to catch up. He set the hand brake, crawled into the back of the truck, and returned with two cold beers from the ice-box. He opened one and shoved it in my direction.

"What in the hell's this, breakfast?" I snapped.

"Drink it. Maybe you'll feel better."

"I don't want it. The only thing'll make me feel better is to give up this nonsense and go home. What in the hell am I doing here, anyway?"

"Drink this beer, you cranky Irish son of a bitch."

I turned to hit him but he didn't move, just stood there grinning.

I glared for a long moment, then grinned back and took the beer.

"I can't feel any worse. I don't know what's the matter. God, Mike, I'm getting so I hate to leave the post. Just too much effort,

or something."

"You ought to get away from that dispensary more. Dave's coming here may be the best thing that ever happened to you."

We got out of the truck and stood drinking the beer. The sun was just pleasantly warm, the air crystal clear, and the countryside smelling of recent rain and of green growing things. Grass covered the rolling ground around us, new grass, dark green against the brown mountains; not a thing moved in the windless morning and except for the gun-grey gash that the road cut across the field of grass, there was nothing to indicate that anybody had ever stood in that natural meadow from the beginning of time.

Then we heard the jeep behind us up the road and a few minutes later Harry pulled it in behind the truck. When they had stretched their legs and had a beer we were on our way again. I felt better--almost glad I had come.

We left the meadow for another series of twisting down grade turns and Mike concentrated on driving; after another hour we broke out of the mountains into rolling country again, not a meadow this time but bench-land extending for several miles on either side of the road. Sheep and cattle grazed on the hillsides and the boys herding them shouted and waved to us.

The land dipped into a gentle slope toward the north and then levelled out again and suddenly Cheren was there a little below us, white-washed and dazzling in the morning sun, the macadam road slashing darkly into the very heart of it.

It's not much of a town, not nearly so large as Asmara, but as Mike drove through the throng of people and livestock that crowded the

street that morning, I could imagine what the town looked like to the truck and camel drivers who had come out of the desert to the north--the coolness of the place, the shops and cafes, the talk and the people; there were highland Copts and desert Moslems, European and Asiatic merchants, and Sudanese carrying spears with yard-long, razor-sharp heads. I remembered all at once how exciting the town was and wondered why I hadn't come there more often. I thought how it must be to a camel driver three weeks out of Khartoum, his goods sold and his camels resting easy someplace, and money in his pocket to spend in forgetting the thirst and hunger, the hot days and cold, empty nights.

We slowed up on the other side of Cheren to let the jeep catch up; then we were in the "gut"--the steep defile that drops north out of Cheren to the floor of the desert.

Here it was really a fight against gravity, down steep, straight grades that sucked at the truck, drawing it faster and faster into the hairpin turns at the end of each stretch, then half a mile or so of writhing turns that would finally spew us out onto another straight, steep grade. It got hotter steadily from the time we left Cheren, and by the time we reached the bottom I was sweating and Mike's clothing was soaked. He stopped at the bottom of the grade to wait for the jeep again and I crawled into the back of the truck for beer.

When Harry and Dave came up we had some bread and canned meat and another beer; then we drove on along the Cheren-Khartoum road for a couple of hours, straight as a gun barrel across the flat floor of the desert, and finally we turned off at the little village of Agordat. The town boasted a single street; paths led from it out between the

mud and grass huts.

There were two permanent buildings there; in the very center of things was the two-story stone building housing the British Administration Police headquarters for that district, and next to it was a low, cool-looking stone restaurant with a large thatched porch in front.

At a table on the porch was the British inspector for the area, half-heartedly drinking an un-iced lemon squash. He came to life as we drove up, getting out of his chair and coming to the edge of the porch, squinting out of the shade into the brightness of the street.

"Well, 'ello, Mike, 'ello."

Mike introduced us and then got caught up in an argument with the Italian who ran the place about whether we were going to have a drink.

"How's the hunting out toward Ademdeme?" I asked the inspector, whose name was Johnson.

"Come for some shooting, have you? Thought you might be looking for some night life. Ha. I wouldn't know about the game out that way; haven't been there since the rains. Scattered, I would guess, all over the bloody shop. Too much water. You'll really get no decent shooting until most of the waterholes in the Barca dry up. Why don't you go on to Carcobat? Loads of leopard up there."

"Too far. This is the first time out for these fellows and we only have three days, counting today."

"Ademdeme's the stuff, then. You can easily make it in time to hunt this evening. The road ought to be all right. There's still some water in spots in the Barca, of course, but you won't have any trouble crossing it below town. You can save time if you cut across to the northeast instead of following the river. There's a good

track across there, or was before the rains. But I guess you know the country right enough, don't you, Mike? Been here longer than some of the natives, eh?"

"I haven't been down this way for over a year, but I can find the track, I think," Mike said. "If I lose it, I can always swing back to the left and pick up the river. Any shiftas around?"

"Not likely. Run a clean division here, we do. The shiftas give my fuzzies a miss. You've no worry on that score."

We followed a trail out of Agordat across the Barca, a river of sand three hundred yards wide with heavy doum-palm growth on both banks and a trickle of water in the very center. In another week that would dry up, I knew, and then there would be no water in the riverbed at all except in scattered holes. The natives along the river dug wells down into the sand during the dry season and were able to get enough water for themselves and their livestock. Game would gather around the waterholes at night and that was the place to hunt, except for gazelle, of course; nobody knows where they drink and you have to stalk them in the open desert.

We crossed the Barca and made out a dim track on the other side across the flat desert. The gray, sandy soil looked hard and packed from the rains, but it crumbled into powder on the surface under our wheels. Here and there an outcropping of rock protruded above the ground and once we passed a mound of quartz pebbles, blinding white in the sun. An occasional acacia tree broke up the landscape and along the larger washes or wadis that ran toward the river were baobabs; now and then we would pass a thorn thicket. Several times we saw large herds of gazelle in the distance but Mike kept us moving. Finally we

saw a dark line of green palms on the horizon, and eventually I could make out a dozen grass huts, burnished bronze against the dark palms.

We drove through the village and stopped on the edge of the line of palms that bordered the river on the other side. Several men followed us from the village, running behind the trucks, shouting and waving to us. All of them carried spears--inch-thick, four-foot shafts with a couple of feet of thin, lozenge-shaped steel on the working end. Some of them had long, curved knives in sheaths belted to them, and one man carried a sword.

There was still enough daylight left to give us time to get set at a waterhole, so we decided to hunt first and make camp later. Mike stood on the front bumper of the truck and gave a little speech, trying to line up guides for us for the evening, but there was so much laughter and excited talking among the natives that he couldn't get anywhere.

The fellow with the sword was standing to the side of the crowd, somewhat aloof, a little taller than the others and straight as a West Pointer. His cheeks, forehead, and chin had been deliberately and symmetrically scarred so that he wore a perpetual scowl, but I guessed that under the built-in scowl there was an amused grin; he was obviously the chief of the village.

Mike finally gave up on the mob, jumped down from the bumper, and went over to the chief; they spoke together briefly and in about fifteen seconds the chief had his crew under control and was assigning the jobs for the evening.

"There's a waterhole about three miles down the river," Mike said. "Two of us can drive down to it, then come up on foot to another

hole just above it. The other two can hunt that big waterhole up river--you know the one, Al, in under that rocky cliff? It's within easy walking distance."

"I know it. But you three go ahead down river. I don't want to hunt anyway, and I can get camp started while you're gone."

"Oh, come on," Dave said. "I'll go with you to the hole. I don't care about hunting either, but the walk sounds good after that jeep ride. Harry and Mike can hunt the other place."

So I took an old Springfield I'd checked out of the armory and Dave took an ancient but deadly looking 12-bore double that he had rented from the gunshop downtown, and we set out with two guides.

"What in the hell do you think you're going to shoot with that thing?" I asked as Dave dug out some shells. "That's a bird gun."

"Oh, no. Guido told me this was a prima gun for boar. See-- look here--it says right on the shell that these are special boar loads. Guido loaded them himself."

I looked at one of the shells; something was stamped on the scuffed case, all right, but so dimly that I couldn't have read it even if it had been in English.

"Probably loaded with buckshot. It's all right for boar when you're tracking them in thick brush, but it's no good at a waterhole. They'll probably be out of range of this thing. Why didn't you bring a rifle?"

"I've never fired one. I fired a shotgun once. Anyway, with any luck at all we won't even see a boar. If we do, you can shoot it. How do you load this thing?"

I loaded the shotgun for him and showed him the safety and how

to use it. By that time we were off the open plains and cutting through the heavy brush toward the river, our guides motioning and glaring us into silence, hoping that there might already be game at the waterhole, but there was nothing so we took up positions on the rocks above the hole and waited.

An old sow and three half-grown pigs came out of the bush on the other side of the river, made their way alertly across the sand and finally drank almost directly below us but neither Dave nor I would shoot, though the natives became almost frantic in urging us to; any hog was fair game to them--sows and pigs did just as much damage to their dhurra crop as boars did and they were all inedible anyway to the desert Moslems. The old sow heard the argument, snorted once, and led her brood off at a tail-high gallop. One of the guides stood up and pegged a rock after them that took the hindmost pig in the rump, jumping him to an easy lead and starting Dave and me laughing so hard that we gave up all pretense of silence.

There was a good fire going when we got back to camp, and a space cleared on the ground for our bedrolls. A young native whom I easily identified as the chief's son from his looks and manner was chopping and piling wood in a business-like way. Squatting near the fire, buttocks on his heels, arms across his knees, was an old man; all the other natives were gone, and the old man might as well have been too for all the attention he gave us.

By the time Mike and Harry got back, we had camp pretty well made and a hot meal started. While we ate they told us how they had jumped a boar in the brush before they got to the waterhole but hadn't been able to get a clear shot at it. They hadn't seen anything else.

After we ate I dragged my bedroll out and spread it on the cleared space near the fire. The old man was still squatting by the fire, and through the flames and heat of the fire he looked to me like an ancient devil. His hair was sparse and completely white and his skin was ashen grey rather than black, drawn tightly across his forehead and cheekbones. No expression on his face gave any clue to the private hell he stared at in the depths of that campfire.

Behind the old man Mike and the chief were arguing in a wild mixture of Italian, Arabic, and arm waving, broken now and then by Mike's explanation to Dave and Harry. Mike wanted to hunt kudu the following morning; the chief insisted that there weren't any kudu because they had all gone back to the Nacfa game preserve over toward the coast. But pigs were everywhere. Everywhere. They ate the crops and chased the children set on guard to scare them off. In the mornings great herds of them came to the waterholes; we would see--grande boars with grosse tusks (gesturing with his thumbs thrust up from the corners of his mouth). Gazelle? Yes, but a long way off. More pig. We would see.

Finally Mike agreed to hunt pigs. The chief, turning to go, called "Abdu" softly and the old devil on the other side of the fire rose slowly to his feet but instead of following the others he came around the fire to where I was lying on my bedroll. At close range he looked more impish than devilish; he had a scraggly beard of maybe a dozen hairs that I hadn't seen through the fire and he smiled through a set of broken teeth.

"You want kudu, Sergente?"

"Sure. Si. I'll take a kudu." I wondered if he had been in

the beer while we were away.

"Okay. Morning. You, me, shoot kudu. Okay?"

"Chief said no kudu," I said, pointing to the chief, who was already leading the others out of the firelight toward the village.

"Si. Okay for chief. Chief got dhurra. Abdu got no dhurra field. Capito? Morning, okay?"

And he followed the others toward the village.

"What in the hell did he mean by that, Mike? What's so funny?"

"Old Abdu. He was telling you that he knows where the kudu are because he doesn't have anything planted that the pigs can eat. The chief isn't going to help us hunt anything else until we shoot some of the pigs off his corn, I guess."

"Do you think Abdu knows where there are kudu?"

"He might. There are some around here during rainy season and for a while afterward; then they go back up to Nacfa where there is more water and it's cooler. Abdu used to hunt with an Englishman named Williams but I never knew him to hunt with anybody else. Williams was a redhead like you; maybe that's why he picked you. Going?"

"I don't know."

"Listen, I'll go if you don't want to," Harry said. "I'd love a crack at a kudu. Boy, I'd have his head mounted and put it up over the bar in the club."

"I don't think he'll hunt with any of us but Al," Dave said.

"That's the way it sounded to me." Mike nodded. "Maybe one of the others will take you after kudu, Harry."

"Not if the chief wants to hunt pig," Mike said, "and it wouldn't do us much good to go after them alone. We'd just as well hunt

boar."

"Why can Abdu hunt kudu, then?"

"He's different. For one thing, he doesn't even belong to this village. He's only half Sudanese; his father was a Portuguese sailor, Williams told me. Abdu's been around--in the Italian navy, the Ethiopian army, and God knows where else. He speaks good Italian and a lot more English than he was showing tonight, but he doesn't speak anything unless he wants to. I don't know whether he'll find any kudu for you, but if there are any here and he wants to find them, he will. He doesn't give a damn for the chief, and he knows this country like the back of his hand. I've seen him all over Eritrea--up in Asmara, over in Massawa, in villages to the west toward Ethiopia--liable to run across him anywhere. Williams told me once that they even know Abdu down on the strip of desert between the plateau and the sea south of Massawa, and that's almost the end of the world."

"Down toward Uangabo?" Dave asked. "I've heard about the place from Dr. Delucca at the hospital."

"That's the place. Roughest country in Eritrea--maybe in all Africa. The natives speak a language nobody else knows, and live in caves up on the side of a volcano."

"You've been there, Mike?"

"Well, actually, no," Mike admitted with a grin, "but I've heard plenty of reports about the place."

"Mark it down," Dave said. "We'll hunt down there one of these days. Then you'll know what it's like first-hand."

"Not me, Dave." Mike was serious. "I haven't been all the way to Uangabo, but I've been as close as I'll ever go. I went part

way across that plain with a British patrol once, not very long after I came out here. We were trying to map the country, but we gave it up. It was rainy season and we couldn't make it across the wadis; the country's full of them through there. Gets all the run-off from that side of the plateau."

"We'll wait until the wadis are dry. We can make it in a jeep."

"Forget it, Dave. At night in dry season the temperature drops as low as ninety-five--sometimes. At six in the morning, it starts back up. And with the sea so close, the humidity is high all the time. No drinking water, no shade, damn little game, and shiftas over in the mountains waiting for you to get hung up in a wadi. You can't even imagine what that country is like."

"Well, we can at least go have a peek at the edge of it sometime, can't we?"

"Not until you convince me that you'd be willing to stop there."

They were still talking when I dropped off to sleep but both of them were up before Harry and I turned out in the morning. By the time I got my boots on, located a cigarette and match, and came awake enough to curse the place and the hour, the smell of bacon and coffee and woodsmoke was heavy in my nostrils, as heavy as the cigarette smoke. I cursed, but without conviction.

The chief was there with the guides he had selected for the day, and Abdu squatted by the fire, drinking coffee.

After I had eaten, I took a canteen of water and some hard rolls from the truck, and picked up the Springfield. Abdu started off without a word and I followed.

We went directly out into the center of the Barca and started

upstream, walking easily in the packed sand. There were some boar at the waterhole where Dave and I had hunted the night before but as soon as Abdu identified them, he ignored them, not even glancing at them as they bolted. We were after kudu and nothing else, and on the other side of the waterhole in the damp sand Abdu showed me the incredibly large, heart-shaped track of a kudu.

"Early. Not run, see? Walk away."

I nodded and we strode off on their track where it was easy to follow across the sandy river but slowed down when we reached the difficult tracking in the thick brush on the other side. When the trail left the brush and led up into the rocky plain, I could no longer follow it at all so I contented myself with following Abdu, who would stoop, study the rocks, squint, and then choose a direction. For the first time I noticed that the old man was blind in his left eye; I wondered how much he could see out of the other eye--whether he was following a track or just taking me for a morning stroll.

We followed the track for two hours, moving slowly but steadily and covering a lot of ground, and never far from the river. Finally the trail led back toward the palm growth along the river. Abdu paused and scratched his head. "You want kudu?"

I nodded. The sun was not far up but it was already hot on my face and I had begun to sweat a little, but we were moving slowly and I felt good.

"Long time," the old man said, "maybe till sun up there." He pointed to where the sun would be in the middle of the afternoon.

"Maybe go now drink beer. Hunt kudu tomorrow, you think?"

"You want to go back now? We just got started." I grinned at

him but he didn't return the grin. He stared hard at me with his good eye and I suddenly began to see that he wasn't trying to beg off, he was giving me a chance to back out!

"Come on, you one-eyed old son of a bitch. Hunt kudu."

The old man turned without a word and started off on the track again and from that time we hunted together. He let me know in one way and another that he could see well enough close up but couldn't see much at a distance, so I left the tracking to him and kept a close watch ahead of us. The trail led back into the thick brush and seemed to move aimlessly around in it. Abdu made a motion with his mouth as though chewing and I understood that the kudu had grazed in the bush.

Once we followed the track to the edge of the brush and out into the riverbed but there in the sand Abdu showed me a track that seemed a little smaller than the one we had been following, and another that was very small.

"Mama?" I asked. "Baby?"

He nodded and launched into a whispered explanation, mostly in Italian, the gist of which seemed to be that we had lost the track of the bull we had been following and picked up the track of a cow and calf. By this time the sun was hot off the sand and I was beginning to lose my taste for the whole thing. I thought that we had probably been following the cow from the first; Abdu was sure we hadn't. I wished I was back in camp, or better yet, back in Asmara. I swore loudly, went back to the shade of the palms, and sat down, and pretty soon Abdu came and sat wordlessly beside me.

I offered him a drink from the canteen but he shook it off. He wouldn't have any of the rolls I had brought, either, so I munched one

and sipped water. A joke is a joke, I told myself, but this one has gone far enough. The old phoney was following that cow all the time. He couldn't find a kudu in a phone booth.

I kept telling myself things like that but it didn't make me feel any better; I had a feeling I had been tested and had flunked. I finished the roll, hung the canteen on my belt, and got up, and Abdu got up too and started down the riverbed with me behind him.

We were moving slowly but the sand, even though it was fairly well packed, was not easy to walk in, and while Abdu didn't set a hard pace, he went steadily and evenly, his eyes on the ground.

The sun was high by now and burning into me, my shirt was crusted with salt from perspiration that evaporated as rapidly as it formed, the rifle sling dragged at my shoulder, and I was just barely keeping up with the old man. We went for nearly an hour that way; for an hour I trudged along behind Abdu with my eyes on his heels, alternately cursing the heat and the old man and after while including the impulse that had started me hunting the night before, and Dave and Harry and Mike. I was several times on the verge of calling out to Abdu to stop but I had pride enough not to, and I wasn't certain he would stop anyway. He hadn't looked back since we left the shade of the palms.

After about an hour Abdu slowed his pace for an instant, then veered from the riverbed up into the palm fringe, through it, and out onto the plains. I followed him without a word, thinking he was leaving the river to take a shortcut back to camp.

It was easier walking on the plains than it had been in the sand of the river but it was hotter. I wanted nothing more, finally, than to sit just where I was, drop the rifle, loosen the cartridge belt, and

wait for evening. But as long as Abdu kept going, I was determined to follow. It had become a contest and I wanted to win it even more than I wanted to sit. He was an old man, half blind, spindly shanked, grey; I looked at my watch and speculatively gave him ten minutes, then ten more, positive that he couldn't last out the half hour. The half hour passed; I studied his back and shoulders for signs of fatigue. He hadn't looked good for five miles when we left that morning, but if he had changed for the worse, I couldn't tell it.

When he stopped I nearly ran into him--I was walking mechanically and I couldn't shut off the mechanism. I was dizzy and my vision was blurred but I had won--then I glanced at the old man triumphantly and realized that there had never been a contest; he looked exactly the way he had at daylight. I didn't know what had stopped him, but I knew it wasn't fatigue.

I sank to the ground, slipped the rifle off my aching shoulder, and started to loosen the canteen. Abdu grabbed my arm and motioned for silence; he pointed to a massive outcropping of rock jutting up out of the plain like the prow of a ship going down by the stern. His lips formed the word "kudu" without actually giving it sound. The old bastard was still hunting! Now I understood that all the time we had walked down the riverbed he had been looking for the track of the bull, guessing rightly that it must have cut across the river somewhere between where we were and where we picked it up that morning.

He waved to me to follow him and I moved off woodenly after him, my breath coming a little easier but my head still spinning. We crept silent up to the rock, then worked around its base on our hands and knees. Abdu stopped and motioned me to go around him, and I inched

forward. As I came up even with him my canteen bumped the rock, not loudly, but perceptibly. The old man fixed me with such a reproachful stare that I felt a kind of shame I had never known before, and, I think, will never know again. I thought for a moment that he was going to get up and walk away and I couldn't face him. I reached back with my free hand and as silently as I could, worked the cartridge belt around on my waist until the canteen hung in the middle of my back. Abdu didn't move as I crawled to the edge of the outcropping.

About a hundred and fifty yards to the left front and slightly below us down a gentle slope was a bull kudu, turned sideways to us, his head high in the air and obviously alerted. I slid on my belly backward out of his line of vision, set the sight on the rifle for two hundred yards with no windage, and slipped off the safety.

Abdu watched all this impassively, noting everything I did with no sign of approval or disapproval, disassociated, waiting. I crawled back into position, silently cursing myself for not zeroing in the rifle, for forgetting the trajectory of a 30.06 bullet, for some other things-- and all the time thinking of what I was doing. I knew that the hard-jacketed military slug would go through an animal without killing, and I decided that the best bet was to aim for the front quarters and high; if I were too high I would miss cleanly, just right would break the spine, and too low would hit a bone in the front quarters and put the bull down. I aimed, held my breath, and squeezed the trigger, and he went down in front, staggered to his feet and took a step forward. I threw another round into the chamber, snapped off a shot that raised the dust two feet in front him, and jacked a third round into the chamber, but before I could fire it, the bull collapsed.

Abdu walked beside me to the kudu; we stood looking down at it, at the amazing size of it and the length of its corkscrew horns, and Abdu suddenly touched the canteen at my belt, shook his head from side to side, and laughed, and I laughed with him.

He cut the buck's throat to bleed it and together we got the carcass on its back. We couldn't dress it without help but Abdu managed to open the body cavity and fish out the liver, which he hung on a stick in the branches of a thorn tree.

He wanted to go for the truck while I guarded the carcass from hyenas, but I insisted on going so he pointed out the approximate location of the camp along the line of green that marked the Barca in the distance. I left him sitting beneath the thorn tree, slicing off bits of the liver and eating them raw.

It was a long walk under the noon sun and I walked it without stopping so that when I got there my face was flushed and I was chilling a little. Dave wanted me to stay in camp while Mike went after Abdu and the kudu but I was sure Mike couldn't find the place and anyway it would take more than two of them to dress and load the animal. More than anything else, though, it was important to me to finish the thing and Dave understood that finally, so we all went.

All that remained of the liver were some bloodstains on Abdu's hands and lips, and if he was tireder than when we left camp that morning, I couldn't tell it. He supervised the dressing of the kudu while Mike and Harry turned the carcass and Dave and I gutted it and skinned out the cape. Only when we were finished and had the meat on the truck did Abdu ask for a drink and I remembered guiltily that I had gone off with the canteen and left him there in the desert, but he didn't

seem to mind.

Harry and Mike had killed a boar apiece that morning and later had both fired on one and wounded it, finally chasing it into deep bush and killing it when it charged. Both of them were keen to go again in the evening. Dave begged off and he and I hunted guinea hens unsuccessfully until nearly dark.

I felt strangely exhilarated all evening. Dave noticed it and mentioned it as I helped him put together a meal.

"Lots of guys hunt them for years and never get one," I said, glancing at where it hung drying in a tree on the edge of our clearing.

"Well, if it makes you feel that good, you'd better go again in the morning. How about that, Abdu?" he called to the old man, who was squatting by the fire as though he had not moved since the night before.

Abdu shook his head and smiled. "No more. One kudu plenty.

Okay, Sergente?"

I nodded in agreement. "He's right, you know," I said to Dave. "I'll never shoot another. It's a nice trophy, but it doesn't mean that much to me. I almost wish I'd never shot it."

Dave said, "That's funny; I could swear it meant a lot to you. But I guess I know what you mean--a second one wouldn't be the same."

CHAPTER VI

The week after our hunt at Ademdeme, Dave and I went to Ghinda. Mike couldn't get away from the station and Harry begged off too, but the Massawa road was busy again after the rainy season and the British were running convoys twice a day, so we went down with the afternoon convoy on Saturday and come back with the morning convoy on Sunday.

It was early evening by the time the convoy crowd cleared out of Louie's place and got back on the road to Massawa--just the time of day to sit on the veranda and watch the shadows lengthen over the mountains if you like to put in your time that way, and I do.

When the convoy had gone, Louie brought a bottle from the cellar and joined us on the veranda.

"Carla will be out in a minute. She's helping clear off the tables. Mike couldn't come, huh? Well, you'll have to stay the night. Can't go back with one truck."

"We'd figured on it, if you'll put us up," I said.

"You know I will. Hey, I hear you got a kudu."

"Yeah--how'd you know?"

"One of the guys that works down there where you're having the head mounted told me. He was in the convoy. Don't let them rock you too much for the job. It's a lot cheaper here than in the States."

"What's about right for the job?"

"Two pounds. They'll get more from an American. Don't give them over sixty-five shillings, though."

"They said it would be four pounds."

"Robbery. Haggle with 'em."

"Okay. It ought to be worth four pounds, though. It would cost three times that much in the States."

"Is a kudu head worth that much, Doc?" Louie asked Dave.

"It's a beautiful head," Dave said. "If a kudu head is worth anything, it ought to be worth four pounds."

"I hate to see them nick you, though. I always wanted a good head to hang over the bar. Give the joint some class. What I wanted was an elk head, you know, but where's a guy going to get an elk head around here?"

"You can have the kudu head if you want it," I said.

"Oh, I couldn't take your kudu. I just wanted a head for decoration. Not somebody's trophy. Why, you might hunt around here for ten years and not get another kudu. You want to keep that thing, Al. Send it home when you go; hang it over your fireplace."

"Hell, I don't have a fireplace, Louie. And I can't hang the thing in my room at the dispensary. It will look great over your bar. I'll put a brass plate on it with my name. You can keep it shined up."

Carla came out onto the veranda. She had changed into a clean white dress and brushed her hair until it glistened. She looked as fresh and cool as the evening around us.

"Al's going to bring us a kudu head to hang over the bar," Louie said.

Dave said, "I'll bet it's just what you always wanted."

"You've been hunting? Where?"

"Ademdeme. North of Agordat, on the other side of Cheren. Know

where it is?"

"Agordat I know, and Cheren. A little white town full of camels."

"It's a very nice place," Dave said.

She wrinkled her nose in disdain. "Like Asmara, only smaller."

"Asmara is a nice town, too."

"Asmara is a dump," she said.

I laughed and Louie frowned. "Where'd you get that word?"

"From you. Where else?" She turned to Dave again. "New York and Boston--those must be really lovely towns. I have pictures of them. I have a picture of Time Square in New York at night, so bright they could take a picture of it with no special lights or anything. It's like that every night, isn't it?"

"I guess so. You know what they say about it? It's a nice place to visit but nobody wants to live there."

"I'd like to live there. It must be a good place to live, or there wouldn't be so many people living there."

The sun was back of us now, behind the mountains, and we looked out of the deep shadow across the plains and into the bright sky above the Red Sea without saying anything, as though we were watching, or maybe listening to, the shadow creep out over the land and dim the sky away off there. There wasn't a single night sound yet, and there was no wind; the chant of the boy who washed dishes in the kitchen came muted through the walls of the cafe, but that died too and the door creaked open and shut and the latch clicked home, and we sat without saying anything.

"You'll never find anything like this in New York," Dave said.

"Who wants it?" Carla said. "If you like it, help yourself; there's plenty of it."

She got to her feet and stood wraith-like in the dim light, her pale face framed in the blackness of her hair. She waved her hand to take in the black mountains and said, "It's like a--tomb. I'm going to light the lamps." I thought her shoulders shook in a kind of shudder as she walked toward the door of the cafe.

"It's a hell of a place to raise a kid," Louie said. "Especially a girl."

He looked over his shoulder into the cafe where Carla was adjusting the flame of a Coleman lamp. Lowering his voice, he said, "You think I could stand a trip to Italy, Doc? I mean, if I took it easy? Rested quite a bit, maybe. Not a long trip; six weeks, two months. What would my chances be?"

"As good as they are here, Louie."

Louie stared into the wine glass in front of him and thought a moment. "Yeah. And I guess I know how good that is."

"You should get those tests run at the hospital. As a matter of fact, you ought to close this place up for a week or so and check into the hospital so they can give you a real going over. You aren't going to get any better until we can find out for sure just what's wrong with you."

"You could help me if I'd get those tests, huh? You sure you could do me some good?"

"I can't be sure. You go on up to the hospital and when I get their report I'll be able to say what we can do."

"Yeah--I'll get up there one of these days. Al, how about

getting another bottle of wine. Carla knows where it is."

I went into the cafe where Carla was sitting on a stool behind the bar, tying a new mantle on a Coleman burner.

"Louie wants another bottle of wine," I told her.

"In a minute." She brushed her hair back from her face with an impatient toss of her shoulder and struggled with the string of the mantle. "Goddam these things!"

The oath wasn't exactly new to me, but it startled me to hear the violence with which she used it.

"We have electricity, you know, from Massawa, but the shiftas keep cutting the wires. We finally had to give up and get these."

"There," she said as she put gas to the mantle, lighted it, and adjusted the air pressure to burn it off evenly. "What are they talking about, those two with their heads together out there."

"Places to hunt," I said.

"To hunt! What fools men are. He doesn't even hunt, really, does he?"

"A little. He's not crazy about it. He mostly goes along for the ride, I guess."

"I know why he goes. He told me. He wants to find a village to live in and be their doctor. That's what he told me. He jokes so much--do you think he means it?"

"That's what he says. I don't know whether he means it."

She replaced the lampshade without saying anything and took up the lamp, and I followed her down the hallway past the kitchen to the closet that served as a wine-cellar. I held the lamp for her while she found the bottle Louie wanted; as she turned to hand me the bottle

her face came close to mine and she looked hard at me.

"Men are like little boys sometimes," she said. "Let him look at villages full of Wogs and sand and dirt and rotten things to eat. But he is a man."

"What do you know of men?" I asked.

"Let him look," she repeated, "but he is a man, and there are other things for men to look at. And he sees them, too. Oh, yes; he sees them."

She paused, her glance fell away from mine, and she stared into the gloom of the tiny wine-cellar. When she spoke again, her voice quavered with emotion. "I love him. All my life I've dreamed of him, how he would come and I would love him and go away with him. I prayed for him--that he would come. And when I saw him that first day, by the wrecked plane, it was like I knew him."

Again she paused. I stood there, stupidly, it seems to me when I think of it now, not saying anything, reconstructing in my mind her whole life--a whore for a mother and God knows who for a father, and old Louie with his talk of America, teaching her the language, helping her with it until she read it and spoke it better than he did, getting it mostly from popular novels and cheap magazines, getting the words and sentences along with the ideas, the illusions, the dreams, not of American really or of anyplace that ever was, but of a never-never land, taking it all for truth.

Then she said quietly and confidently as though she were stating an obvious truth, "I love him. He's my man. And I'm going to marry him and go to America with him. We'll live there, a doctor and his wife, just like anybody else. It has to be that way. You see that,

don't you, Al?

Still I said nothing. She took the lantern from me and I followed her down the hallway and into the dining room of the cafe. Dave and Louie had moved in from the cool evening air.

"Walk to Massawa for that wine, did you?" Louie asked.

"Just looking over your stock. You got a pretty good cellar."

"Naw, there ain't a good wine cellar in Eritrea any more."

We talked about wine and other things I can't remember, but I didn't have much to say that evening or the next morning while we ate breakfast and waited for the convoy.

I drove as usual, and it was slow going, mostly in second and first gears, following along behind the little Fiats and the motley assortment of Italian trucks. Dave did most of the talking and half the time I wasn't listening.

Finally he said, "What happened between you and Carla last night?"

"What do you mean? Nothing happened. Why do you ask that?"

"She went off to her room after you came back with the wine, like she was mad about something. And she didn't come out any more all evening. This morning at breakfast you did everything you could to keep from looking at her. What did you do, make a pass at her back there when you went for the wine?"

"Maybe. Jealous? Haven't you ever made a pass at her yourself?"

"I've thought of it. But I can't because she's in love with me."

He wasn't boasting or anything--just stating a fact.

"That's what she told me last night."

"Ah--and you told her there wasn't a chance, so she got mad and left the party. That explains it."

"Nothing like it. I didn't tell her anything. Hell, I didn't know what to say. Things like that embarrass me--it's none of my business to start with. For all I know, you do love her."

"I don't. There was a time, right at first, when I thought I might, but I don't love her and never will. She needs a man who will take her to the States, build a home for her out in the suburbs, spend the rest of his life supporting her--keeping her dream alive. She belongs with streets and traffic, supermarkets and department stores, Sunday school and cooking school and PTA. That's her dream, Al--and it's easy enough to get, why shouldn't she have it? But I can't give it to her. I'm not the man."

"Why not? What do you dream about that's so important? A home in some Wog village? Dhurra bread three times a day, chicken and goat stew with cinnamon on holidays? And what else--a native wife, maybe, or a hut full of fourteen year old housekeepers, like that crazy British inspector over in Senafe? Her dream may be silly to you, but it makes more sense than yours, if you ask me."

He laughed. "Don't lecture me on dreams, Father Alvin. I won't defend mine--if I could, maybe I wouldn't have anything to do with it afterward. It hasn't any reason behind it that I know of. If it had, it wouldn't be a dream, would it? I may find a village I want to live in, and if I do, I may live there a week or a month or a year, wake up, and go someplace else. I might fall in love with Carla and marry her--how do I know? But it isn't anything I plan on."

"Then you ought to tell her so. And we ought to quit going there."

"Yes, I think you're right. The devil of it is, last night

while she had you cornered telling you that she love me, Louie was asking me to take care of her if anything happened to him."

"God! And I suppose you promised?"

"What else could I do?"

I didn't know so I didn't say anything. Pretty soon he said, "Bad day for you when you told Wilson to keep me, huh? I've pretty well shook up your little world, I guess."

I couldn't tell whether he was mocking but I didn't think he was.

"The hell with it," I said. "Things change. Nobody causes it; it just happens. Do me a favor, though--get straight with Carla, will you? Tell her right out that you aren't interested and then stay away from her. Forget about helping her--let somebody else do it. You couldn't help her anyway."

"Okay. I feel sorry for her, though, Al. She deserves a break--she's never had one. God knows what will happen to her after Louie dies."

"Forget it. She'll make her own breaks."

"Sure. You're right, Al. I had no business getting involved with her and Louie the way I did to begin with. A thing like that never works out for anybody. Let's not worry about it any more."

That was easy enough to agree to, and I was lying on my bed that evening in Asmara reading a book and trying to do it when Truskowski knocked at the door.

"That Lieutenant Lester--he a buddy of yours, Al?"

"Well, yeah, I guess so." I hadn't thought of it that way but I let it pass.

"Then you better go downtown and get him. He's in a bad way."

"Harry? You mean he's drunk, or what?"

"Smashed out of his skull. He's down at the Mod buyin' drinks for a bunch of spongin' Limey privates. He really blew in a bundle this weekend. When I left the place he was about passed out. He's been passin' out off an' on all day."

I found Harry in the Modernissimo, as Truss had said. He was at a table near the dance floor, sitting with several British privates and lance-corporals. And he was a mess. They were all drunk, but Harry was the worst. He was wearing one of the beautifully tailored tropical worsted uniforms that he wore most of the time, and it had held its shape pretty well, but even in a fifty dollar custom tailored shirt he was out of the running for best dressed soldier on the post--collar buttoned, but no necktie; sleeves unbuttoned and one rolled halfway to his elbow; shirt pockets unbuttoned and bulging with crumpled cigarette packages, shilling notes, and scraps of paper; and shirt front stained with something or other, probably from his being sloppy or sick, or maybe both. He was a mess. I stopped in front of him but he looked right through me. He needed a shave, and his face was pale around the black stubble; with a kind of fixed grin he sat staring across the dance floor, muttering incoherently through his grinning lips. If I hadn't been looking for him, I might not have recognized him.

A Limey private sitting beside Harry was wearing Harry's garrison cap. I squeezed in between them, put the cap on Harry's head, and shook his shoulder.

"Come on, let's go back to camp."

"Cork off, can't you, Yank," said the soldier who had been wearing the cap. "The evening's only just begun. What do you want to go taking our mate for? He's our mate, ain't he, lads?"

"Easy does it," one of his buddies said, adding in a loud whisper, "He may be a ruddy officer, you know."

I was wearing a sport shirt; they couldn't tell what I was. I thought there might be trouble. Harry was an easy mark for them and they naturally hated to see him go.

"Aw--he's no officer," one of them said. "If he was, he'd be wearin' it. Proud of it, he'd be. They all are, same as ours."

"Come one, Harry. I've got a taxi waiting outside."

"He is so an officer. Hear him callin' the lieutenant 'Harry'?"

"That's nothing. Yanks all do it."

The argument went on, out of the whispering stage and about to reach the shouting stage, but Harry paid no attention to any of it or to me, so I hoisted him to his feet and led him between the tables and out the door. His shoe laces were were untied and kept tripping him. Every time he lurched and stumbled, the soldiers cheered. When we went through the door they were singing "He's a Jolly Good Fellow." Harry was the best thing that had happened to them since the free rum issue on Christmas.

Back in the dispensary Harry began to wake up. I fed him some black coffee and made him take off his shirt and wash his face.

Then he got talkative and I thought he might keep it up all night. I wished I'd gone ahead and dumped him in bed the way he was.

"Boy, what a weekend," he kept saying. "Let me tell you about a real weekend, Al, boy."

"Keep it until morning. Sleep it off first, then tell me."

But he wouldn't have that. I had to listen while he worked his way back through the weekend. He'd pulled the British soldiers off the street in front of the Modernissimo to drink with him early in the afternoon.

"I opened the place up. I was right there waiting when they unbarred the door. Right after church."

"Church?"

"Sure. I went to church. Think I'm a pagan? Early in the morning. Too damn early, if you ask me. Went to mass."

So we went back through his going to church and what a real experience that was. He had gone to mass with an Italian hostess from the Odeon cabaret; spent the night with her and then gone to mass with her the next morning.

"A true experience," he told me solemnly. "A really, honestly, validly, truely true experience. Fruitful. Awfully affectionate girl. I may marry her."

"They say that kind makes the best wife."

"That's what I think. Man knows where he's at with them. Know what I mean? Strictly cash deal. Man knows where he stands with a woman like that."

"Sure he does."

That got him back to the subject of the thing which had started it all--his wife, as I had already guessed. I knew that he'd been trying to get her to come overseas, and that he wasn't having luck at it. He had apparently become so insistent that she had written him telling him frankly that she never would come to him overseas or any

other place while he was in the army; he could come home and attend to business like a good little boy or he could go whistle.

His mother had added a loving little note to the letter--
"Louise is a fine girl, Son, and deserving of better than you have given her. I sympathize with her and have assured her that she will always have a home here. It is your home, too, if you choose to make it so."

He had gotten the letter on the mail plane only the day before, but it had aged a lot since then. He kept reading it and making me read parts of it to him until I was sick of the thing. Once he crumpled it into a ball and threw it on the floor, but then he picked it up and smoothed it out.

I had just about persuaded him to go to bed when Dave, who had heard about Harry and had been out looking for him, too, came in, so I had to listen to the whole sorry story again.

It was nearly daybreak when we got him to his quarters. He was still far from sober but I thought he would sleep it off.

Light came in the east as we walked back to the dispensary. The tops of the useless old Italian antenna towers were bronzed with the first rays of the sun; a pan clattered and a cook swore softly in Italian as we rounded the corner of the mess hall. I had a dull, deep headache.

"Why don't you go on to bed for a couple of hours," Dave said.
"Tesfi and I can handle the morning sick call."

"I couldn't sleep. Damn, I feel sorry for Harry. What can we do, Dave?"

"Forget it. He'll be all right as soon as he sees that going

back is the one thing he can't do and that she isn't coming over here. Look, I feel bad about it too, Al, but there isn't anything either of us can do. You told me once that you always looked out for number one first, so forget Harry for a while. He's just another guy around the post. His problems are his own. Don't involve yourself in them."

"That's good advice, coming from you. Hell, if it weren't for you, I wouldn't even know Harry Lester's first name."

Dave grinned. "Well, don't sweat it so much. Harry will work things out."

CHAPTER VII

Harry didn't work things out, though, unless you'd call staying drunk most of the time working things out. He divided his off-duty time about evenly between the club and the cabarets. He rarely came to the dispensary for coffee; the few times he did come he was so tired and hung-over that he just sat there drinking his coffee mechanically.

I'd see him in the club in the evenings usually. We'd have a drink or two and he would try to get me to go downtown with him. I would generally beg off, so he would find somebody else to go with him or go alone. Some mornings I would see him come through the main gate and head slowly up toward his office in the headquarters building in time to go to work. In a week or so he got so he could walk with a full load and not stagger--go along looking straight ahead and concentrating hard on every step and on walking in a straight line. When I'd yell a good morning at him, he'd turn his head about half-right toward the dispensary--I suppose he was afraid to turn it all the way--and nod maybe half an inch in my direction; if it hadn't been too hard a night, he'd risk a wave of his hand. And grin. He pasted a silly, vacant, mechanical grin on his face whenever anybody spoke to him, and he kept it there until the conversation was over.

I went downtown with him once, but he was too much for me; I couldn't follow him. We went from bar to bar and cabaret to cabaret, pouring it down. At midnight, I said, "Let's call it an evening,

Harry. I'm blind."

"What's the matter? You don' like it here? How about the Gallo d'oro? There's a real live place."

"How about let's go home? I've had it."

"Go home! Go home! You sound like a broken record. You don' wanna drink with ol' Harry, you go the hell home. Shows a fella who his friends are."

He said a lot more but I wasn't listening. I got up and went back to the post. About four in the morning a corporal off the evening shift who had been downtown doing some light drinking after he got off work came by my room and told me that Harry was passed out at an all-night restaurant downtown. I was between a drunk and a hangover myself and still half stupid from being jarred out of a sound sleep.

"The hell with it," I said. "Why didn't you bring him home?"

"I didn't know if I could wake him up. And I was afraid he'd get mean. He gets mean when you try to bring him in. Wants to fight. I've seen guys try it. Anyway, he's not my buddy."

I didn't say anything. The corporal stood there uncomfortably for a moment, then he said, "Well, I just thought I'd tell you. You're not mad, are you?"

"No, I'm not mad. It's all right. I'm glad you told me."

So I went after him. He was passed out, all right--face down in a plate of pizza. I shook him awake and held him in the chair with his head back while I mopped cheese and tomato sauce off his face with a napkin. He cursed and tried to get up out of the chair and swing at me but he couldn't get up until I let him up, and by that time he was almost out again and could hardly stand, let alone hit me.

The waiter came over and demanded twenty shillings. I couldn't see anything on the table but the pizza and part of a glass of red wine, worth altogether no more than four shillings but I figured just having Harry around in that shape was worth a little something so I fished his billfold out of his hip pocket and gave the waiter a ten-shilling note from it. He called me something in Italian that I couldn't understand, which was probably just as well, and I called him a dago swindler and left with my buddy.

When we got back to the post I took him to his quarters, dumped him on the bed, and went back to my room. The next evening he was in the club again, wanting me to go downtown with him.

It went like that for two weeks and well into the third. Sometimes he'd spend the night with one of the cabaret girls and two or three times he got a room in the CIAAO hotel, but several times after the cabarets closed for the night he went to a restaurant and drank wine until he passed out, and Dave or I or both of us went after him. He just couldn't stand to come back to the post--and he wouldn't come back for anybody but us without a fight.

He couldn't keep it up forever, of course, and things came to a head the Friday night that we received word that the Department of Army was finally going to let dependents come to Asmara. All the married officers and non-coms were whooping it up in the club that night.

I went over about ten o'clock. The bar was lined with people, all of them talking about finding quarters downtown and what they'd do when their wives got there and how they'd go to Massawa on the weekends--things like that.

Harry, who was at the stool at the far end of the bar when I

got there, looked almost sober. He was staring at the bottles behind the bar, his phoney little smile in place, trying hard not to hear what was going on around him. I squeezed in beside him. I felt sorry as hell for him and I motioned Sabato, the bartender, to bring him a drink, but before Sabato could mix it, Kettar, who was down toward the other end of the bar, stood up and yelled, "Wait a minute, everybody! Quiet! The next drink is on me. And I want to propose a toast to the finest ladies in the world--our wives."

There was some cheering, then Kettar waved everybody into silence again and started to say something more when Harry spoke up loud enough to be heard down the length of the bar, "Give me a double scotch, Sabato, and put it on my bill."

"No, no, Sabato," Kettar said. "This is my round. Put it all on my bill."

"Keep your money to feed your kids," Harry said. "I can buy my own drinks."

There was an awkward silence for a moment, then Kettar said, "Well, nobody wants you to drink with us if you don't want to, Lieutenant. I thought you might like to help us celebrate."

"Celebrate what? Somebody brings a couple of sandwiches to a banquet and you throw a party over it. Big deal. There's plenty of that stuff over here already. Why use up tax-payers' money to import more?"

I don't know whether Kettar would have fought or not, and it didn't make any difference because he wasn't fast enough to get to Harry first; the two sergeants at the bar next to us would have beaten him by several lengths. I blocked one of them, but the other one, a

tech-sergeant named Miles, made it around me. I remembered when I saw him throw the first punch that he'd boxed in Golden Gloves, and he probably did well, judging from his form that night.

Miles hit Harry first with a left jab that brought the blood gushing from Harry's nose and set him up for the right cross that opened a deep gash high on his left cheek. Harry was driven into the corner between the wall and the bar, with one elbow hooked over the bar, holding him up. It looked for a moment like Miles was going to follow through, but Major Wilson put a stop to it.

"Take Lester over to the dispensary," Wilson told me. "Don't let him leave the post tonight. And get Wright to look at that cut."

I started to take Harry's arm but he shrugged me off and walked out, looking straight ahead. I followed him past the line of men at the bar, through the hallway and out the door. Nobody said anything. They were pretty mad at Harry but none of them liked Kettar either, and I think they were uncomfortable having to take his side. I had some pretty strong feelings about my part in the thing, too, and I can tell you this--if I could have turned the clock back fifteen minutes, I'd have been anywhere but in that club. That's the hell of it; you get tagged as somebody's buddy and the first thing you know, everything that happens to him happens to you, too.

I called Dave at the Regina. By the time he got back to the post, I had stopped the bleeding in both places and cleaned the cut. Dave decided that he wouldn't need to take stitches.

"You're going to have a beautiful shiner, though, Harry, and probably a scar across that cheek. If you ever get stationed in Germany, you can join a dueling fraternity. What happened? Fall off a

bar stool?"

"I made an ass of myself, Dave. A complete ass."

"You've been doing that for weeks. So what else is new?"

Harry grinned--a genuine grin for a change. "This time I shot off my mouth. Insulted a bunch of nice guys and got pasted."

"What's the other man look like? You mark him for life?"

"He'll have sore knuckles for a week."

Wilson and Crimmons came in; Wilson went over to Harry and said, "How bad are you? Anything broken?"

"No, Sir. I guess not."

"He's all right," Dave said.

"Kettar wants to court-martial him," Crimmons said to me.

"Can he do it?" I asked, looking at Wilson.

"He can't. I can, but I'm not going to. He got drunk and popped off and somebody poked him for it. If I court-martial one, I've got to get them both. I can't spare either of them. Miles is a good operations non-com, and you're a good supply man, Lester--or you were. Maybe you can be again."

Harry looked at the floor without saying anything.

"How about it, Doc? Is he worth wasting time on? What's he need?"

Dave thought a minute. "A couple of nights' sleep, a few good meals, three or four days away from the booze. A few days away from the post would help, too."

"Take him hunting. Maybe he'll dry out in the desert. You can manage it, can't you? Call up that Italian doctor. Crimmons, call Mike at the station and tell him to get in here."

"Tonight?" I said. "It's almost midnight."

"I got a watch," Wilson said. "Be off the post by daylight. That will give me a few days to cool it with Kettar. See if you can get Lushwell, here, straight; if you can't, we'll do something else."

I offered a couple of arguments but they slid off Wilson's back as he went through the door; Crimmons winked at me and grinned, said "So long, Battler," to Harry, and followed the major.

By daybreak we were two hours out of Asmara on the Cheren road. We made camp near Ademdeme, in the same place as before. None of us felt like hunting, even Harry, although he had slept most of the way.

The same crew of natives came out to meet us with the same stories of big and abundant boars--all except Abdu, who was nowhere around. The chief didn't know where he had gone.

"You miss the old man, don't you?" Mike said.

"He was a good tracker," I replied.

We had eaten a big meal in the restaurant in Ademdeme and none of us were hungry so as soon as the natives, convinced that we weren't going to hunt that night, had gone, we made sandwiches from a roll of roast kid that Mike had gotten from an Italian in Cheren. We sat around in the dusk eating the sandwiches and drinking cold beer and not saying much; there was a rustling breeze in the very tops of the palms and an acrid smokey smell from the village. Down the river a hyena laughed, a high-pitched, nervous chortle, and the dogs in the village answered back with a furious yapping. Then there was a loud, grunting cough from the bush near the village. The yapping stopped immediately and we couldn't hear anything but the wind in the trees.

"A leopard, by God," Mike said. "He's out early."

"Could we hunt him, Mike? Have we got a chance at night?"

"Not a bit, Harry. If we had a goat staked out somewhere we might get a shot. One quick shot by flashlight. But you can't stalk him, not at night."

"Think we could track him in the morning?"

"As far as the rocks--that's where they hole up in daytime. And the best tracker I've ever seen can't find their spoor in the rocks."

"I'd like to try tracking one, though."

"Forget it. We'll track some boar in the morning. You guys coming with us?"

"I don't think I will," Dave said. "Maybe I'll take a shotgun and go for some guinea hens. Why don't you go with them, Al? You don't have to hunt with me."

"No thanks. I know the game, and I don't want to play."

"What do you mean, you know the game?" Harry asked.

Mike grinned and explained, "You pick out the biggest boar track you can find at a waterhole about dawn and follow it as fast as you can. When the boar gets tired being pushed, he'll go to ground in a thicket and charge the first thing that tries to follow him."

"Sounds like fun," Harry said.

After bit when darkness fell completely and the air cooled, we drew in toward the fire and talked about nothing in particular and smoked. It was early when we went to sleep; the sundown breeze had died and the night sounds were all around us. There was even some noise from the village; we beat them to bed. I didn't give a thought to why we were down there that evening because it seemed natural to be there. I remember thinking in that last moment between consciousness

and sleep, that time when you can sometimes think your best and clearest thoughts, that if it were like this I wouldn't mind living in a place like Ademdeme always. I thought that maybe Dave was right and the rest of us were fools not to know it.

I was dozing in my chair at the dispensary, my feet on the desk, more than half asleep and at the same time looking out the window at the rain clouds forming over the hospital; there was a cool freshness in the air and the rains were coming, but they weren't there yet. Any day, now, any day. Somebody shook my shoulder; I thought it was Crimmons, and I sat upright in the chair and tried to get my feet off the desk.

"Come on, Al," Mike said. "If you're going to sleep all day, at least move out of the way so we can get breakfast started."

"Just resting my eyes," I mumbled. "I wasn't really asleep."

Then I came all the way awake and knew where I was, but I wasn't disappointed the way you sometimes are when you wake from a good dream, because the dream that day was no better than the reality.

Mike and Harry went after boar and Dave and I took the jeep and drove out across the plains from thorn thicket to thorn thicket, looking for guinea hens. We took a guide, a courageous fellow who sat in the back of the jeep and clung grimly to the side. Now and then he muttered something but we didn't know whether he was giving directions or praying. When the sun got up and became unpleasantly hot we put the canvas top up on the jeep and that seemed to make him feel safer; he got bold enough to let go of the side of the jeep with one hand.

It was easy hunting; we stayed within sight of the palm fringe of the riverbed and when we saw a flock of the hens on the plain I

would drive at full speed into the center of them before they could run into the palms or into a nearby thorn thicket. We would get almost into the flock before the birds flushed. I'd slam on the brakes and Dave would jump from the jeep and start shooting. He was no great wing shot but the flocks were so big that he usually got one or two out of a flock, and they flushed a few at a time so he had time to get off four or five shots with the ancient automatic he was using.

We quit when we had ten birds. We loafed along back to camp, stopping a couple of times to look at some rock outcroppings and once to examine an abandoned village. Dave questioned the guide about the place and decided on the basis of some motions and gestures he made that the village had been abandoned because of an outbreak of smallpox.

We cleaned the birds and put them on ice and then Mike and Harry came in with a huge boar. They hung and dressed it and carried the offal away while Dave and I made a fire and fried sausages and eggs and potatoes.

It was very hot on the plains; Mike and Harry were sweating when they came back and Harry blotted the sweat from his face with his shirt tail, grimaced, and grinned ruefully.

"Stings like hell when sweat gets in that cut," he said.

"Stay in the shade," Mike said. "If you don't move around much you won't sweat enough to bother you. Now if you were on the plains along the coast, you'd be wringing wet with sweat all the time, the humidity's so high."

"I wish we were there, though," Dave said. "I'd like to see that country down there."

"We can go down there some weekend," Mike said. "It isn't any

worse than Dhahran, I guess. We probably won't get much hunting-- maybe gazelle. We can go through that valley where the plane came down and on north from there."

"How about south of Massawa?" Dave asked.

"Toward Uangabo?" Mike smiled. "You won't rest until you've been as far as you can go, will you? Well, I suppose we could go part way. It's easy driving for the first twenty kilometers or so."

"What's so difficult about it after that?"

"Everything. No roads, bad terrain, heat--why, if you had a breakdown in that country, you'd be lucky to get out alive. And the mountains to the west are full of shiftas. It's dangerous country."

"Some people would think this country is dangerous," Dave said.

"I can't see how we could be in much danger down there if we had two vehicles. If one broke down, we could get out in the other."

Mike shook his head. "Probably not. There are several places where we had to pull one truck out of the sand with another truck when I was down there, and we didn't even get across the worst part of the plain. No, I wouldn't try it."

"I thought you were game for anything," Dave said. "I didn't suppose there was any country around here that could stop you, the way you handle that weapons carrier."

But Mike smiled and said, "Flattery won't get me down to Uangabo, either. You'll see why when we have a look at the country. Anyway, there's nothing worth going for."

"That's what you keep telling me," Dave said. "But how do you know? You've never been there."

"I've been as far as I intend to go."

Dave didn't hunt that evening. The rest of us took the jeep and a guide and drove across the plains and away from the river until we spotted a herd of gazelle. We made a wide circle to the downwind side of them and stalked them on foot until almost dark without getting very close. When the shooting light was almost gone, Harry tried a shot at about five hundred yards, missed cleanly, and we drove to camp.

Harry rode back up the mountain with me in the jeep the next morning. He was quieter than usual but I thought he had settled things with himself.

Once he said, "What do you think the old man will do, Al?"

I knew he'd been thinking about it all morning. I didn't know what to say. I said, "Maybe if you get your work done and don't cause any trouble, he won't do anything. Kettar will make things tough for you if he can, but he can't do much as long as Wilson is here. The first sign that you're back on the booze, though, and Wilson will ship you out."

He was silent for a long time; then he said, "If I can last until I'm discharged, maybe I'll do what Dave says he's going to do--settle down around here."

"My God--another one! The bush is going to be crawling with American ex-officers. At least Dave has something to offer for his board and room; what are you going to do for a living?"

"I'll find something. There are plenty of business opportunities in this country. Maybe Louise will change her mind and come over. Maybe I'll feel like going back. I don't know. Right now, all I care about is getting back to work. The hell with planning for the future. It never has got me anything."

We got back to Asmara late in the afternoon, unloaded the gear and the game, and split up to go to our quarters for a shower and some clean clothes. When I finished showering and dressing, I went to the club for a drink. Dave had gone downtown but Mike and Harry were at the bar. I gave Sabato my order and said to them, "How about you guys? Ready for another one?"

"Not me," Mike said. "I've got to go to the station tonight."

"I'll pass, too," Harry said. "I've got a lot of work to do in the office before I turn in."

They went out and I took my drink over to Wilson's table.

"How about it?" Wilson asked. "Think he'll stay off the stuff?"

"I think so. He isn't a lush; he just went on a long binge. Now that it's over, he'll find some other way to pass the time. Maybe he'll try to take it out in work."

"That's all right. I don't care if he works himself to death on those supply records. Time somebody did some work on them. Just as long as he stays out of trouble."

"He will. I'd bet on it." I wouldn't have bet very much, but I didn't say that; what the hell, I thought, Harry needs a break if he can get one.

I finished my drink and went back to my quarters. It took me a long time to go to sleep and when I finally did, I had a screwy dream that woke me--Wilson was tossing coins and I was calling them. Sometimes he'd win and shove the coin in his pocket, but when he'd lose, he'd swear and send the coin spinning off into the night. I was glad when morning came; I was tired playing a sucker's game, even in a dream.

CHAPTER VIII

The dependents began to arrive a family at a time. They came by commercial air but their baggage was sent through military channels, and as we had the same bad air service we had always had out of Dhahran, most of the baggage got hung up there. Kettar's family was one of the first to come in, and that kept him occupied for a time; then Wilson sent him to Dhahran to see if he could do something about moving the dependents' baggage from there, so he had time to cool off a little about the incident in the club. He was so busy, in fact, that he didn't even get a chance to give Mike hell for going hunting that night.

The arrival of the dependents meant more work for us at the dispensary, but we had the physicals and shots out of the way and our regular work load wasn't too heavy. We fixed up an emergency operating room in the little hospital and also got together enough hospital equipment so that we could accommodate two bed-patients if we had to.

I rarely saw Harry through the week; he buried himself in his office, and when I did get a chance to see him, all he could talk about was the new system of property accounting he was working on.

Dave worked out a regular system of exchange of standby duty with Dr. Delucca from downtown, so that we had every other weekend off and could leave after the morning sick call on alternate Fridays and be gone until Monday morning.

Dave wanted to see the country along the coast, so on the first weekend we went down the Massawa road to the foot of the mountains,

then cut north on a dirt track out into the strip of desert that lies all along that coast between the sea and the mountains. It is weird country, that strip--low, barren, rocky hills, bright and nude under the sun. Here and there a strange, jagged rock formation jutted up out of the smoothness of the surrounding country.

Around Agordat and Ademdem the landscape is hot yellow and pure gold daubed with green along the watercourses. But in that desert around Massawa the light is a cold blue--the reflection off the white rocks and light sand, I suppose; maybe the humid haze that hangs over the coast has something to do with it. It's a disturbing color, incongruous in that heat, a dead blue color, the color of rotten ice, of the lips of a three-day corpse.

I felt apprehensive all the time we were in that country; we all did. The apprehension wasn't all the effect of the curious landscape, though, for that is shifta country and we had to be careful. We left Asmara about noon and stopped only briefly in Ghinda, so that by dusk we were some twenty miles north of the Massawa road. We passed the ruins of several Italian farms tucked in tiny valleys between the bare hills. They had been made fertile once by irrigation, these valleys, but now they were as bare as the hills around them. What had once been comfortable homes were now caved-in stucco houses, fire-blackened where the insides had been burned out of them. Tumbled-down rock fences ran out from the houses more or less at random, like the legs of a crushed spider.

We stopped at an abandoned farm just at dusk, and threw the jeep's winch cable around a fallen roof beam, winched it out into the open, doused it with gasoline to get it burning, and cooked supper.

We could see the twinkles of other fires in the valleys over against the black mountains to the west, and I'm sure the people there could see our fire--we made it big enough. We ate and then sat around talking for about an hour. Then we loaded our gear and pulled out, leaving the big beam still blazing. If any shiftas waited there for us to come back that night, they had a long wait for nothing; we drove about twenty miles to the east and camped in the dunes along the coast.

Saturday morning we drove back toward the mountains, not directly west into them, but angling to the north where there were some valleys with water the year around; sometimes kudu drift off the big Nacfa preserve and come down that way.

There aren't any villages in that country but in some of the valleys we found a stone hut or two where Eritrean families were trying to scrape a living from the rocky ground around the watering places. The women kept out of sight and mostly kept their children out of sight too, though now and then we could see a grinning little face peering out the door of a hut. The men, though were bold enough; there were two or three of them at each group of huts, and they came up to the trucks when we stopped, asking--or demanding, it seemed from the tone of voice--to guide us to game of some sort. Most of them wore light khaki jackets, fairly clean and unstained with sweat, put on, I think, as soon as they heard our trucks in the distance; some of them had khaki pants, too, but the rest wore dirty white pantaloons, Ethiopian style--knee length and baggy. Narrow-nosed, thin-lipped, shifty-eyed men who had like as not been run out of their mountain villages--we didn't hire any of them as guides, and they invariably shook their fists at us as we drove off. Dave felt sorry for them and

wanted to hire some of them but Mike wouldn't hear of it. I felt sorry for them, too, but not enough to trust them.

None of us really felt like hunting anyway, so we just drove along the plains to the north, now and then branching off into a valley and following it as far as we could and then back-tracking to the plains again. We jumped several enormous flocks of guinea hens which gave Dave and Harry some good fast wing shooting, and twice we tried stalking gazelle on the plains, but we didn't get close enough for a shot.

By noon we had reached the point where the mountains came down to the sea, about forty-five or fifty miles north of Massawa, and we could go no farther north, so we made a lunch there of cold C-rations and beer. It was hot and humid and windless. We sat in the shade of the trucks because there was no other shade; the sun was high and the trucks cast little enough shadow, so that we sat huddled against them like cold men around a pot-bellied stove. They reeked of gasoline and hot oil and water-proof canvas, and the stench of rotten seaweed hung in the humid air. The queer cold light was all around us, especially out over the Red Sea; there was no breeze and the sea lay calm in the heat, so bright you could hardly look at it. We didn't stay long at lunch.

We turned back toward Massawa in the afternoon, driving with the canvas tops of the trucks up as protection from the sun. Perspiration soaked our shirts and wouldn't evaporate in the humid air. We drove slowly because the jeep engine kept overheating, and by the time we reached the Massawa road in the middle of the afternoon, we had all we wanted of that country. We headed up toward Ghinda.

Louie was playing solitaire on the veranda; we changed that to a game of ten-point pitch, Louie and I against Mike and Harry, while Carla and Dave whipped up spaghetti and thick meat sauce for dinner.

When we had finished eating, Dave remembered the guinea hens we had in the ice-box in the truck, so he got them and gave them to Carla. Louie eyed the hens and said, "That's a hell of a catch for a day in that country. You should've got a boar, at least. Why don't you go out in the morning? Take the old road down that valley where the plane crashed. There's a couple of water holes down there. Get there early enough, you can probably pot a hog without having to wait. You know where they are, Mike? North and a little east of where the plane came down."

Mike shook his head no, and Carla said, "I'll show you. I know right where they are. Oh, please, Grandfather. I can take them right to the waterholes."

"What! You, down in that place? Nothin' doin'. You know better than that. Anyway, you got too much to do tomorrow. It's Sunday, people'll be comin' at noon. Nope."

Dave looked at me and lifted his eyebrows and I said, "What the hell, Louie, I'll stay here and help you. Give her the morning off. I don't want to hunt anyway."

"I'll take care of her," Dave said. "It'll be all right. Let her come if she wants to. We'll start early and be back before noon."

Louie finally consented so I stayed with him while the rest of them went hunting the following morning, but there really wasn't very much for us to do because his Eritrean help did most of it. We spent

most of the morning just sitting on the veranda. I mentioned that he hadn't taken the lab tests Dave had asked for.

"Can't now," he said. "Truck's broke down. I wouldn't even try to take it up that mountain in the shape it's in."

"Well, you can't get it fixed down here. You'll have to take it to Asmara sooner or later. Tell you what--there's a ship coming in at Massawa, week after next, full of supplies for the post. I'll be helping haul the stuff up the hill, and I'll stop by and follow you up. If the truck won't make it, I'll tow you in."

"Oh, hell, Al, that's my busiest time, when a ship comes in. Guys stoppin' in for beer all day long. All night, too. Why, I keep the joint open around the clock when you guys are haulin' supplies from the ship. You know that--you've stopped in often enough. Nope, I can't miss all that business."

"Carla can run things for that short a time. You'll only be gone overnight."

"I can't leave her here alone with them Eritreans. Can't depend on 'em. Probably mostly shiftys themselves. She'd try it, but she just ain't old enough to go it alone yet."

"Well, she better be, because if you don't do something about that heart, she's going to be going it alone permanently--and a lot sooner than you think."

He thought about that for a long minute, then said, "All right, I'll come up if you think it'll help."

"It's a lot better than doing nothing about it."

"I guess. If it wasn't for Carla, I'd say the hell with it."

The hunting party came back in high spirits. They had ambushed

a whole herd of pigs at a waterhole, Mike and Harry each getting a large boar. Carla's complexion was rose-tinged with the sun and she was laughing and enjoying the teasing she was getting from the three men; she had bravely taken my rifle and with Dave as a coach was all set to shoot a boar, but at the last moment she had been seized with buck fever and couldn't shoot. They had all sat waiting, whispering encouragement; finally Dave burst out laughing and the pigs bolted, and Harry and Mike had to take moving targets.

As we left for Asmara I reminded Louie of his promise. "You might as well come too," Dave told Carla. "You can't stay down here alone overnight. I'll show you around our hospital. We've fixed it all up since you've seen it."

"I can't come. Somebody will have to stay here to run things. I'll be all right."

"With all the dependents coming in, we may have to hire a nurse. You better come up and look around. You might want to apply for the job."

Carla smiled and looked across at Louie, who was standing next to the weapons carrier, talking to Mike. She put her hand on Dave's arm for a moment and said, "You talk him into moving to Asmara, and I will come be your nurse."

"I'll work on him," Dave promised. "And you be careful if you stay down here over night alone."

When we got on the road I said to Dave, "You almost hired yourself a nurse. I'd laugh if she'd take you up on it. What would you do then?"

"I'd hire her--what else? I was serious. We've got enough

work to do now so that I could hire another civilian employee if I wanted to."

"Oh, that would give the post something to talk about--you hiring a nurse who probably hasn't been in a hospital five times in her life, but who just happens to be a nice, young doll who looks like a touched-up photo of a Hollywood starlet and walks like an honor student in a school for models. Where would she live--in the hospital?"

"You've noticed that too, have you?"

"Noticed what?"

"The way she walks."

I gave him a withering look but nothing withered. "Why don't you just marry her and move her and Grandpa up to the post? Or is that too conventional?"

"I'll give it some thought," he said, so matter-of-factly that I couldn't tell whether he was kidding or not.

CHAPTER IX

Every ten months or so a ship loaded with supplies for the post came in at Massawa. We never knew exactly when to plan on the ship's arrival; some of our supply requisitions were filled by air shipment, but others were filled and set aside until enough supplies were collected to make sea shipment worth while, and we had no way of knowing when that might be.

But at some moment somewhere in the States, a quartermaster clerk would decide that the backlog was large enough to justify sea shipment, so the supplies would be loaded on a freighter bound our way. And when the ship was well at sea, somebody--probably the same quartermaster clerk--would suddenly jump up from his beer at the NCO Club one evening, snap his fingers, and exclaim, "Oh, hell! I forgot to cable that relay station in Asmara that they have a cargo due in Massawa on the seventeenth. Whatever you do, Jack, remind me of it at the office tomorrow, will you?" Now and then Jack would remember, but more often we found out about the shipment from the ship herself when she cleared Suez.

When we knew a ship was due, the post buzzed. Every available driver was pressed into service to haul supplies up the mountain; minimum crews manned the station, post administration stopped temporarily, and even the PX closed while we worked to take the supplies off the ship and bring them up the mountain.

I always hauled cigarettes, cases and cases of them. The motor pool crew took the seats out of the bus that usually hauled the men to

and from the station and we filled the old bus with cases of cigarettes. By some kind of nasty accident, most of the ships sent to us while I was at Asmara came during the hottest, driest part of the year. It was a killing trip--five hours down the mountain with the long, clumsy bus, including stops to let the brakes cool, a short nap while I waited for the bus to be loaded, then eleven hours back up the mountain, including stops to let the engine cool from the hard pulling in third and second gears, and finally a short nap before the next trip.

Harry took his clerks and some clerks from the post administrative section to meet the ship at the dock. They worked regular shifts of eight hours on and four off throughout most of the week, but even during his hours off Harry seemed to be around the dock a lot, supervising the checking of the manifest against the cargo as it came off the ship, straightening out problems, listing lost and damaged goods, working in a daze of heat and exhaustion, as we all were by the end of the week.

And actually, most of the frantic press to get things off the ship and up the hill was needless. It would have been simple enough to store part of the stuff in dockside warehouses and bring it up at our leisure, but none of us ever seriously considered it. The truth was that we liked the business. We toiled away exactly like a string of ants who have come upon a discarded sweetroll, moving in an endless circular chain, waving our antenna at those on the other side of the chain as we passed them on the road, running in the sun, storing up our find against the coming months, determined to have it all before a giant hand swept it into the cosmic garbage can. We worked with mad, mechanical efficiency, and always with a giddy gaiety; it was our carnival, our circus, and we bolted our cold rations and gulped water

warm from a canteen because alcohol puts a tired man out of it altogether, and went without sleep to enjoy it all.

I made four trips that year, one more than I usually made from the ship, and it was on the return leg of the last trip that I was supposed to stop at Ghinda for Louie and follow him up the mountain. Even his old truck, I thought, wouldn't have any trouble staying ahead of the loaded bus. I was exhausted, driving well enough but mechanically, shifting and steering and checking the temperature and pressure gauges automatically with scarcely any conscious effort. Since the ship had come in, I'd hardly given a thought to Louie--or to anything else, for that matter, except the immediate necessity of getting the ship unloaded. I had buried myself in the frantic activity as I had always done before, and suddenly I was so tired that I could just barely keep my mind on what I was doing. Thoughts and ideas kept coming to me in waves, breaking, and sweeping out of reach again before I could examine them. I thought how it would be good to get the last load up the mountain, drop the cargo off at the PX warehouse, turn in the bus, and sleep; I'll want a shower first, I thought. It's always better to sleep clean. Maybe I'll just grab a nap and then sit at my desk, reading and dozing a little.

Then I remembered that the waiting room would be busy, people coming and going, waiting to see Dave, just sitting around gossiping. The ship coming didn't change that; it hadn't turned the clock back. The dispensary would never be the way it was before. Dave had changed all that. No, he hadn't, not really. He took it the way it was, and if it changed, he just happened to be there at the time. Things change; they're supposed to. That's the way it works. And if you think they're

permanent then you're a fool because just when you get your feet on the desk and a cigarette going and are all set to spend a few minutes studying the smoke, the door is going to open and somebody is going to walk in and start telling you his story, and the first damn thing you know, you're part of the story and you'll have to lift your feet off the desk and get up and do something about it.

But the dozing is the fine life if you can get it, I thought, and I had had my share of it in the four years I had been at Asmara.

I fished a cigarette out of my shirt pocket, started to stick it in my mouth, realized I had one there already, and tried to get the fresh one back in the pack. It wouldn't go; it bent, it writhed in my fingers, and finally it broke. I flipped it out the window. What the hell, I thought, I've got a whole bus full of them. I won't run out of cigarettes before I get up this hill. The idea amused me and I chuckled aloud and knew when I did it how tired I was. It's all right, I told myself. I can drive this mountain in my sleep.

I'd left Massawa some time after midnight and now the sun was up behind me, its light bouncing off the dark mountains ahead, glaring enough so that I began to wonder where my sunglasses were. I passed a truck on its way down after another load. I didn't envy the driver, having to drive directly into the sun. I thought I ought to stop and rest but the engine was not overheating and for some reason I hated to waste the time. I drove with my left hand, worked my canteen out of its cover with my right, took a drink, poured a little water down the back of my neck, and thought I could probably make it to Ghinda.

About eight o'clock as I rounded the last turn and began the

short straight pull up the slope to Ghinda the reflection of the sun seemed brighter than it ought to be. I began searching my pockets for my sunglasses, and then through the trees I saw flames and smoke above them, and I was suddenly awake again. The cafe was on fire. Two American trucks were parked in front of the place and three or four figures rushed aimlessly about. I turned off the highway into the parking lot and saw Louie lying on the ground, with Carla and an American kneeling beside him.

The shiftas had hit the place a couple of hours after dawn, shooting into the shuttered building without doing any real damage, then finally setting it afire and fleeing as an American truck came down the road from Asmara. They fired one last volley from the slope above the cafe as Louie and some of his Eritrean help came running out to fight the fire and one of the shots had taken Louie in the hip. Even with Louie down, the Eritreans and the American might have put out the fire if it hadn't reached the little shed attached to the main building where Louie stored the kerosene he used for his stove. When I arrived forty-five minutes later the whole building was flaming and there was nothing to be done about it.

The old man's face was white under the gray stubble of his beard as I knelt over him. He recognized me and managed a wink and a half grin but he kept his lips clamped together tightly.

From what I could see I guessed that the bullet had entered from behind through his left buttock and angled downward, coming out midway on his left thigh. The thigh bone was broken and I was afraid the hip might be. The slug was jacketed, probably British .303 military, and it hadn't left a big hole, but there were fragments of

bone in the torn flesh where it had come out; he was damn lucky, I thought, that it hadn't tumbled end over end and chewed its way out. But he had lost quite a bit of blood even from the small hole.

"He'll be all right? You can fix him, Al, can't you?" Carla was paler than usual and crying but not panicky.

"I can't do much for him here but get this bleeding stopped. We'll have to take him to Asmara. It'll be all right."

Both the truck drivers had left the fire and were standing watching us; one of them was a company clerk, the other a navy signalman.

"Donovan," I said to the clerk, "have you got a blanket or something in your truck?"

"I got a GI bedroll."

"Get it. How about you?" I asked the navy man.

"All I got's a poncho I sleep on while they're loading my truck."

"Get it. Bring your canteen, too. Drag four or five cases of cigarettes out of the middle aisle of that bus and throw them on your truck," I told Donovan as he came up with the bedroll.

"God, I don't know, Sarge. I drag them cigarettes back down that mountain, Lieutenant Lester's gonna give me hell for sure."

"Get the goddam cigarettes off that bus!" He jumped and Louie grinned with his lips still clamped shut. "You help him," I ordered the sailor. "Carla, give me a hand here."

I didn't try to clean the wound; I just clamped a four-by-four bandage over it as tightly as I thought I dared and let it go at that. We doubled the poncho over and snapped the sides shut, put the bedroll on top of it, and managed to get the whole thing under Louie without

moving him very much. By that time Donovan and the sailor had cleared a space in the bus and the four of us were able to lift Louie on the makeshift litter and put him on the bus. When he was settled I worked the poncho out from under the bedroll and covered him with it. He took it without making a sound louder than a low groan, but the moving opened the wound again and I had to put pressure on it for several minutes before I could get the bleeding stopped.

It's a two-hour drive from Ghinda to Asmara in a jeep; I made it that morning in the loaded bus in three hours, burning up the clutch in doing it, and running the engine so hot that it was whistling when we got there. Carla sat on the floor of the bus with her feet in the doorway, holding Louie's hand and now and then stroking his forehead, saying nothing the whole three hours. Louie closed his eyes eventually and from what I could see from the driver's seat, he might have been dead, but there wasn't any point in stopping to find out.

I pulled up in front of the hospital and we took Louie in to one of the rooms. Dave didn't ask any questions; he got right to work. I tried to help him but the fatigue of the past three days hit me all at once. I was trembling and so dizzy that I had to sit down.

Dave said, "Go get some sleep. You're no help to me now, and I'll be needing you worse later. I'll have to get a surgeon from downtown. He can bring another man with him."

And I stumbled off to bed, not bothering to shave or bathe or even wash the blood off my hands.

Dave woke me about eight that evening and we sat in my room for a while drinking the coffee he had brought in a pitcher from the mess hall. The coffee was stale and bitter, and the little heat in it went

out into the mug as soon as it was poured. The first cup left a bad taste in my mouth; I knew I should eat but I wasn't hungry. I refilled the cup and mixed an ounce of medical alcohol with it.

They had done some surgery on Louie shortly after we brought him in, Dave told me--not much, just cleaned things up a little, stopped the bleeding, and looked around to see what could be done.

"Is he going to make it?" I asked.

"He's still alive."

"Meaning he won't be for long?"

"Probably not, unless we can amputate the leg. And his heart's so weak that we're afraid to risk it."

"So what are you going to do?"

Dave shrugged. "Keep him here for a couple of days, anyway. Try to build him up enough to operate, eventually. We'll have to move him downtown as soon as possible; we don't have the facilities here to do the kind of surgery he needs. Between the two of us, though, we can take care of him at night as long as he's here, and Carla can be with him through the day. I don't want to hire a nurse to special him. I'd have a tough time explaining that expenditure. I'll do it if I have to, though."

"We'll manage without it. I'm caught up on my sleep. I shouldn't have brought him here in the first place; I ought to have taken him to the Regina. I don't know what I was thinking about. Too tired to think, I guess."

"It doesn't matter. They couldn't do any more for him than we can right now. And I think Carla would rather have him here."

"Anyway, you ought to call Wilson and let him know Louie's here

and how he got here. Commanding officers generally like to be kept up on all those little details."

"Your buddy Kettar took care of it for me," Dave grinned a flat, humorless grin. "What would we do without him?"

"What did Wilson say?"

"He understood that it was an emergency. He took care to let me know that he wouldn't have called at all if Kettar hadn't reported that we were treating an alien civilian in the post hospital. Wilson doesn't care one way or the other."

I thought about that a minute and then said, "Where's Carla now? She can't stay with Louie day and night. We'll have to find some place for her to stay."

"She's with Louie right now. She's going to spend the night at Thorne's house."

Lieutenant Thorne was a watch officer at the station. He had quarters on the post, not far from the hospital. His wife was one of those moderately plump, curvy, fertile-looking women who never seem to have children of their own and who, once they get into their early thirties, go around mothering anybody who will stand for it. I thought it would be a good place for Carla.

We went to the hospital so I could relieve Carla, and she went off with Dave to Thorne's. I set up a folding cot outside the door of the little room Louie was in and lay there trying to read in the dim light of the hallway. I finally gave it up and lay there until I thought I might doze a little, then I moved the cot into the room, close to Louie's bed.

I was still awake, though, when he began to come out of the

anesthetic they had given him that afternoon. I was supposed to call Dave when Louie regained consciousness, but I decided to wait until I was certain that Louie was coming out of it. I couldn't see any sense in calling Dave only to have him sit there for a couple of hours doing nothing.

The old man stirred restlessly and then was quiet. I watched closely for signs of nausea and vomiting then decided that it would be some time yet before he showed any signs of real consciousness. I was about to lie down on the cot again when suddenly his eyes popped open, swept from side to side quickly, and then rested on my face.

"You still here?" he asked very softly but in a steady voice.

"Sure, Louie. Still here. You feel sick?"

"Listen," he said, "where's Carla?"

"She's all right. She's staying with a family here on post. How do you feel? Stomach upset? Any pain?"

"On post? Oh, yeah, I remember. Listen, you gotta tell her something for me."

"In a minute, Louie. Right now I've got to call Dave." Louie protested as I left the room, first begging, then commanding me to stay, not raising his voice but holding it low and level, and I knew that each word was causing him pain. I went to the hallway as quickly as I could and called Dave. He answered the phone in the middle of the second ring; he always could, no matter how soundly he was sleeping.

When I came back to the bed Louie had his eyes closed, but he opened them again after a moment and began to talk in the same low voice.

"Listen, Al. And get it straight. There's a little money in the bank downtown. Tell Carla not to blow it all on a damn funeral.

Now there's some more in a jug in Switzerland that she don't know about, and she couldn't get it if she did. Broulon, runs the Flamingo club downtown, he knows all about it and he can get it for her. He's a weasel but he won't dare welsh on this, so you talk to him, huh?"

He paused. Sweat stood out all over his face from the effort of talking.

Then he went on, "You got it? Broulon. The Flamingo. Tell him to get the money and give it to Carla."

I nodded. "I got it, Louie. Now take it easy until Dave gets here."

He grunted and closed his eyes. Dave came in, took one look at him, and gave him the shot of adrenalin he had set up beforehand. Louie's breathing was shallow and irregular, but when the adrenalin began to take effect, he opened his eyes, looked at Dave, and said, "Take care of her, Doc. Whatever you can do, huh? She's the only thing I ever done right, and that's got to go a long ways for me. Maybe it'll stretch. I wish I had a drink. And a priest. Get me the drink first, will you?"

He closed his eyes again but kept muttering incoherently. I called Thorne's house and told them to send Carla over, but by the time she got there he was unconscious and he never regained consciousness.

CHAPTER X

I went to the funeral. The service seemed very short, which was all right with me. After the service we walked in procession behind the hearse to the cemetery. The walk was short, too; the cemetery was only across the churchyard, a couple of hundred yards behind the church. There was a high rock wall around the cemetery and from the sidewalk you couldn't tell what was on the other side of the wall. I'd been by the place dozens of times but I didn't know it was a graveyard until we buried Louie there.

There was another short service of some kind at the grave. It was in Italian or maybe Latin--I couldn't understand it. There were quite a few Italians there, people Louie had known, I suppose. Some of the women were crying and carrying on and patting Carla, who was crying too, but not making as big a fuss about it as some of the others.

Dave and Mike were staring solemnly at the coffin and I couldn't tell what they were thinking. Harry watched Carla and was plainly moved; he looked like he might start sobbing, too, any moment.

It occurred to me as I stood there that Louie's funeral was the first I had ever gone to. My mother died when I was awfully young and if I went to her funeral, I can't remember it. After that the old man and I moved around a lot and I guess we never got to know people well enough to have to go to their funerals. The old man died while I was overseas during the war, so of course I didn't go to his funeral, but I've never thought he would have cared much. I'd been to

some military funerals, but I didn't think those counted, because I hadn't really gone to them; I'd been sent. It seemed to me that there was a difference--at the time, that is, standing there by Louie's grave, the difference between going and being sent was clear to me. But not now; when I think about it, I see there wasn't much difference at all. I was going to skip Louie's funeral until Dave told me that I ought to go because Carla would be hurt if I didn't.

They lowered the coffin into the grave and it was over. I was in full dress uniform and sweating just a little as we walked back toward the church. Mike walked beside me, in full dress uniform too, and with a few fine beads of perspiration on his forehead and on his upper lip above the heavy black moustache. He pointed to the line of clouds that had formed on the horizon out over the plateau, and I looked at them and nodded; the rains would be on us in a week or so. The season had slipped up on both of us.

The Thornes took Carla to the funeral and then brought her home with them. Mrs. Thorne was talking to Dave in the waiting room of the dispensary when I came in from changing my clothes. Nobody told me that the conversation was confidential, so I stayed. There was warm coffee on the hot-plate, so I offered Mrs. Thorne a cup, but she must have guessed that it was left over from morning, for she declined.

"We're wondering what to do about Carla," Mrs. Thorne said. "She doesn't seem to have any relatives or close friends here in town. You'd think she would. We can't just turn her out on the town. You know where she'd end up--a pretty girl like that." Mrs. Thorne sniffed and her plump little nose wiggled like a rabbit's. "She's perfectly

welcome to stay with us, of course; we are glad to have her. But some plans must be made for her future."

"Have you talked to her about it?" Dave asked.

"Of course not. It's much too soon for that. But I thought you might have some idea of what would be best for her. You two seem to be the only close friends she has. Perhaps her grandfather made some plans. Did he ever discuss the matter with you?"

I told her what Louie said about the money in Switzerland. "I don't know if there really is some money or if it's just something he imagined. Carla can talk to this Broulon. Maybe there is enough for her to live on until she decides what she wants to do."

But Mrs. Thorne wouldn't hear of Carla's talking to Broulon.

"We know nothing of him except that he runs a cabaret," she said, "and that certainly is no recommendation. Apparently he was not a family friend. Carla hasn't mentioned him. You will have to see him. If it is necessary for Carla to talk to him, I suppose he can call at our house."

I glanced at Dave, saw from the amusement in his expression that I could expect no help from him, so I agreed to see Broulon. Mrs. Thorne left, satisfied that she had done all she could do.

It was nearly midnight when Dave and I arrived at the Flamingo. It was Friday so there were plenty of customers, mostly British troops, though several Americans hailed us as we made our way to a table. Generally the music at the Flamingo was provided by a genuine American juke-box, but on Fridays and Saturdays a six-man combo furnished the noise. They were sawing their way through "It's Gotta Be This or That" when we got there; we took a table as far from the dance floor as we

could get.

From the knot of hostesses at one end of the bar a woman who looked like she might be in her early thirties, allowing for a certain amount of occupational wear and tear, detached herself and came over to our table. I had the idea that I'd seen her a couple of years before at the Odeon, but I wasn't sure.

I wasn't surprised when Dave pulled out a chair for her and introduced her; I had long since stopped being surprised at the people he knew in Asmara.

Dave ordered three gin-limes and when they came, he traded drinks with her, knowing there wouldn't be any gin in hers; most of the girls worked for the difference between the cost of what they ordered and the cost of what they actually drank.

"I had too many at the club before we came downtown," Dave lied.

"How's the bambino?"

"Oh, fine, Doctor. He cough a little in ta morning early, but not at nights no more."

"Good. No more fever?"

"No. He feel fine alla time." She stumbled around with her GI English trying to thank him. Her vocabulary wasn't up to it but Dave got the idea and cut her off.

"Here, give the boy some of these now and then." He fished around in his jacket pocket, came up with a paper bag, and handed it to her.

"What is? More medicine? You tink he need more?"

"Not medicine. Candy. Sucaro." It was curfew time for the limeys and they were noisily piling onto trucks at the front door.

When the woman finished her drink, Dave asked, "Is Broulon here?"

"I get him for you." She left us, spoke a few words to the bartender, and rejoined the bunch of bored women at the bar.

"You know this guy?" I asked Dave.

"I met him somewhere. Didn't I mention it?"

Before I could reply, Broulon came from the room behind the bar. I had seen him around town, but I didn't know him. As he walked to the table I sized him up. Smooth was the word for him; little taller than average, not thin but not fat, dressed in a tailored single-breasted gabardine suit, clean shirt, clean hands, clean face, shined shoes--maybe sleek was a better word than smooth for him. I remembered that Louie had called him a weasel.

He wished Dave a good evening and when I was introduced to him, he included me in his wishes. His English was good, no particular accent, and his voice was low but not husky--smooth like the rest of him.

"Louie sent you," he said to Dave. "I've been expecting you. What did he tell you?"

"Not me. Al, here." Broulon's eyebrows acknowledged that bit of information by moving upward a fraction of an inch, but he didn't say anything.

"He told me there was some money coming to Carla," I said. "It's supposed to be in a bank in Switzerland. He said you'd get it for her."

"He didn't say why she couldn't get it herself," Dave said.

"Inheritance tax, maybe?"

"I'll get it for her," Broulon said, ignoring Dave's question.

"It will amount to about fifteen hundred pounds, give or take a couple of hundred, depending on what kind of conversion rate I get."

"It's in dollars, then?" Dave asked, wasting his breath again.

Broulon said, "That's quite a roll for a kid her age. Eighteen, isn't she? Or is she older? What's she going to do?"

"We thought you might have some idea about that," I said.

"You seem to be the only close friend Louie had."

"Me?" The idea seemed to amuse him. "I'm not a close friend. I hardly knew him. Our contacts were purely business. He must have told you that."

"He didn't say anything about you except that you could get this money for Carla. He said she didn't know anything about it, and as far as I know, she still doesn't." I didn't know whether Dave had mentioned it to her, but I didn't think he had. "When she gets the money, she's going to want to know where it came from and why Louie left it in your name instead of hers. She'll naturally want to meet the man her grandfather trusted so much."

Broulon thought about that for a minute; finally he said, "What Louie's got coming isn't in my name, or his either. It's a pay-off for staying away from certain places and certain people. As long as he was alive, he couldn't collect it. He had to die to get it." The idea seemed to amuse Broulon; his smooth, thin lips curled briefly in a tight grin. "Personally I always thought he was a sucker. He sold out too cheap and when he got the price, he couldn't spend it. Anyway, it's none of my business. But if he was hung up on this granddaughter, I suppose that explains the deal. All I am is the pay-off man. The money will be in the British bank here in Asmara in the girl's

name within a week. Anything else I could do for her wouldn't be worth doing."

I looked around the club and at the group of women at the bar and decided that Broulon was right; he had nothing to offer Carla. Dave had come to the same conclusion. We thanked Broulon and left.

Sunday afternoon Dave called on the Thornes--or rather, on Mrs. Thorne and Carla; Lieutenant Thorne was on duty at the station. We hadn't seen Carla since the funeral but Sunday morning she called and asked if Dave could come over, so he went. Nobody invited me.

It was still that afternoon and almost hot; the air seemed heavy and even the sunlight was a brassy weight on the whitewashed buildings. I thought the medical records would be in bad shape because I hadn't even looked at them since the ship came, so I took some from the files and spread them out on my desk, but when I started in on them, I found that they had been kept in good shape; what Tesfi had missed, Dave had taken care of, and I had nothing to do. The hell with it, I thought. I didn't want to work anyway. I swung my feet up on the desk, leaned back, and looked out the window.

Crimmons came in, kicked the desk, and jarred me awake.

"Come on! Look sharp, boy. You ain't gonna get those records done that way."

"Dammit! Do you have to do that? It startles hell out of me."

"I know. You almost fell outa that chair. Why don't you nap in your bunk? Who you trying to impress, anyway?"

I collected the records, put them in order, and returned them to the file. "They're all done. Tesfi and Dave took care of them. Sometimes I think this place could run without me."

"It's gonna have to, Al, boy. It's gonna have to run without lots of us."

"What does that mean?"

"You haven't heard?" He knew damn well I hadn't, but when he had some news to tell, he had to tell it his own way. There was no use rushing him, so I shuffled records around in the file.

"Yeah, the order came in on the plane yesterday. You'd ever come to the club anymore, maybe you'd know what's goin' on. It'll catch you and Mike and me--and about half the officers on the post. Nelson and Bowers for sure, and Wilson. . ."

"What in the hell are talking about, Crim? What will catch us? What order came in?"

"Department of Army order. Supposed to stop all this homesteading overseas. Everybody with three years or more overseas has got to return to the States. One year in the Z of I before you can be eligible for another overseas tour. Too many guys goin' native and turnin' ape. You got a drink around this morgue?"

I got a bottle of good cognac, a couple of glasses, and a corkscrew. Crimmons opened the bottle while I rinsed the glasses under the tap by the coffee urn. His hand shook a little when he poured, and when he looked at me over the glass, I noticed that his eyes were bloodshot.

"Hell, you look like you've been up all night."

"You ought to see old Mike. We closed the club at six this morning. He's been here so long he thinks this place is home. I'm kind of attached to the place myself."

"Yeah, so am I. How long we got?"

"The order allows a 'reasonable time for implementation,' with a maximum of six months. It was nice of 'em to give us that long, but it wasn't out of the goodness of their hearts; they've got to find replacements somewhere."

Dave came in when we were on the second glass of cognac, and judging by the way Crimmons had poured the first two, there wouldn't be more than one more apiece.

"Somebody's birthday?" Dave asked.

"Have one," I said, pouring a modest jolt into a handy coffee cup. "We're shipping out."

"Oh, yeah--I heard. But you're starting a little early. The way I heard it, you aren't going for six months."

I put my drink carefully on the corner of the desk--the cognac was warm, and I'd had two glasses of it. "You mean you knew about it? And you didn't say anything? Didn't you think I'd be interested?"

Crimmons, who had poured the cognac in on a pretty solid foundation of other drinks, thought that was very funny.

Dave said, "I'm sorry, Al. I guess I just took it for granted that you already knew. Anyway, I had other things on my mind. I'm really sorry to hear it. I know you like it here, and I've got a good idea of what it means to you to have to leave."

He was so genuinely sorry that I couldn't have been angry with him if I'd wanted to. He took a sip of the cognac, then said, "Why don't you two go pick up Mike and make a night of it? He'll be taking it pretty hard, as long as he's been here."

"We'll finish this before we go," I said, dividing the rest of the cognac as equally as I could among the three of us. Dave looked

ruefully at his cup which was about three-quarters full of straight cognac, but he tipped it up and tossed off a good long gulp.

"And how did the conference go? Did you and Mrs. Thorne decide what to do with the helpless little orphan that fate left on your doorstep?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, there wasn't much for us to decide. Carla wants to become a nurse, and she should have enough money to see her through training easily, so there's no problem."

"She'll be going to Italy, then?"

"No; she's going to stay in Asmara--at least until she gets through training. I talked to Dr. Delucca on the phone. They can start her in a course of training at the Ospedale Regina in a few weeks. She can take classes up there in the mornings and work around the dispensary here in the afternoons."

"Seems to me like she'd get more nursing experience at the hospital downtown. There isn't anything to do around here."

"Well, she wanted it that way, and Dr. Delucca thought it would be all right. She wants to get on to the American way of doing things. Thinks she might go to the States someday."

I didn't have anything to say to that; Dave took another drink from the coffee cup and said to Crimmons, "Is there any way I can put another civilian on the pay roll here at the dispensary?"

Crimmons grinned. "Sure, Doc. I thought you'd never ask. Come up Monday morning. I'll help on the forms and run it through the personnel clerk."

"Come on," I said to Crim. "Let's go find Mike and get the party started. He's probably in the club already."

Clouds had darkened the sky though it was two hours before sundown. I had drunk too much of the cognac too fast, and I thought it was dusk, but while we were on the way to the club there was a sudden gust of wind, a few spatters of rain, and then a downpour.

We ran for it; by the time we reached the shelter of the covered patio beside the club, we were soaked.

"What the hell!" I yelled to Crim over the roar of the rain.

"It isn't supposed to rain in the afternoon. Not till the season is half over."

"Believe it, boy, if it makes you any drier. Come on, we'll get Sabato to start a fire in the fireplace."

It was bad luck, Sabato told us, having afternoon rains that early in the season. It would be a bad year for crops--no good planting anything. A very poor year for going on trips, too, and for getting married, and the worst kind of year for being sick. His mother, he said, had died in just such a year, from catching a fever while on a trip to see his older brother.

CHAPTER XI

Carla's coming to the dispensary made things a little like old times for me in one way, for she took over most of my duties in the afternoons and for the first time since Dave came, I could actually look forward to the whole afternoon with nothing to do. I still took care of the sick-book and the records of treatment for the morning sick call while Carla was at classes at the Regina, but she gradually took over things in the afternoon.

Dave wanted it that way; he shook me awake late Monday morning to tell me so.

"She'll start this afternoon," he said. "By the end of the first week, I want her to be taking care of all the records you keep in the afternoon. You awake, Al? What time did you guys get home?"

"About daylight. You told us to have a party."

"That was yesterday. Anyway, you got what I said about Carla? Start this afternoon breaking her in, and by the first of the week, the afternoon records are all hers. All you have to do is check them. If there are any errors, she can make the corrections the next day."

"She'll have to learn to type."

"She can type a little already, and she can pick it up as she goes along. You don't have much typing anyway. By the end of next week, remember, I want you out of the way entirely in the afternoons."

"She can't do it, Dave. Hell, I have to do part of it in the evenings sometimes. How can she pick all that up in a single week?"

Anyway, none of it will help her much toward becoming a nurse."

"She can do it. If she wants to work here, she'll have to do it. You never work overtime on the records unless I keep you busy in the lab all afternoon. And she can learn a lot about nursing by helping with examinations and setting up the equipment. Later on, I'll start her in the lab. First, though, she learns the clerical end of it."

"You really intend to pile it on her, don't you?" I said. "If you didn't want her around, why did you tell her to come? Why wait until she gets here and then try to run her off?"

Dave smiled. "It wasn't exactly my idea that she come here to work. She thought of it and then sold Mrs. Thorne on it. They had it pretty much settled before I was even consulted. But I mean to find out from the start whether her heart is really in it."

"Or whether it's somewhere else? Hell, you know that already. She may or may not want to become a nurse--I wouldn't know about that--but I know for sure that she wants to be a doctor's wife, and I know which doctor. If you're interested, all right; having her around is the right idea. But if you aren't--well, you're making one hell of a mistake."

He didn't say anything. He wasn't smiling any more, and I thought he was angry. "I realize that your love-life is none of my business," I said, "except that in the case of Carla, I feel a certain amount of responsibility--enough so that I'll be damned if I'll sit around and watch while you hurt her."

For the first time since I had known him, I saw him perplexed and uncertain.

"I want to keep from hurting her, too, Al. I suppose that's

why I couldn't refuse to let her work here. She loves me--or thinks she does, which amounts to the same thing. She told you that, and she's told me the same thing--dozens of times."

He began to pace the floor and suddenly I felt sorry for him, for I saw that he was as vulnerable to doubt as anybody else is. I had never thought of him that way. I'd taken it for granted that he would always be unruffled, even-tempered, cool, a man who might make mistakes but whose mistakes would be made in decisive action. He paced the floor of my room that morning, and I saw a man who was groping for the right thing to do.

"I don't feel a thing for her, Al. Beyond what any man would feel for a woman that beautiful. And I won't have her that way. I've refused to have her that way. Don't look so shocked--she suggested it. Can you guess how that made me feel?"

I couldn't and I didn't try. "Why did you ever consent to let her work here? If she is in love with you, working around here isn't going to make it any easier for her--or for you, either."

"I told you I couldn't help it. She and Mrs. Thorne went to work on me and I couldn't say no. What could I tell her? 'No, you're not my problem. I know you love me, but please go away'?"

"That was probably the right thing to say."

"All right, maybe it was. But I couldn't say it. I would have hurt her too much."

"Not as much, probably, as you will hurt her in the long run by letting her stay."

"No, I suppose not." He paced silently for a moment, then burst out bitterly, "Love! If I just knew what people mean by it! They talk

about falling in love as though it were like falling in a well or something. Like falling in a tank of cold water, or a pit full of fire. Personally, I think it's ninety percent illusion and the rest biological impulse. The last ten percent is the only thing I ever feel, and that's not strong enough to make me want to be tied down to a wife and a family. I've got lots of things to do, Al. Lots of world to see."

He stopped pacing abruptly, looked at his watch, and said, "I've got to go--some lab work that won't wait." In that instant he became himself again, confident, sure, completely in control. "If Carla wants to be a nurse, we'll make one of her. Get her on those records first thing this afternoon; by next week, I don't even want to see you around in the afternoons. You're always wishing you had more time to loaf--here's your chance."

Before I could reply, he walked out.

This was, as I said, on a Monday morning after a very active weekend that had seen Mike and Crimmons and me drinking and talking and commiserating over the new order that would send us all back to the States in six months. I felt like doing almost anything but explaining medical records to someone who knew nothing about them, had never seen one, and undoubtedly didn't give a damn about them. I considered going to the club for a few drinks, and then downtown for lunch. I could call Mike from downtown and get him to join me after work; we'd make another night of it. Let Dave break in his own help.

I showered, shaved, put on clean khaki pants and the brightest sport shirt I owned, and went to the refrigerator in the examining room for a glass of milk. Beside the pitcher of milk was a paper

packet with two capsules in it and a note on the outside in Dave's handwriting: "Take these with your milk. Great for a hangover."

"Damn him," I said aloud to myself. I poured a glass of milk and drank it, swallowed the capsules, and went to the mess hall for lunch, stopping by my room on the way to change my shirt.

Carla was in the waiting room of the dispensary when I returned, helping Tesfi clean the coffee-maker and set it up for the afternoon pot of coffee. She was wearing a new white cotton blouse, rather stiffly starched, and a deep blue skirt. Her hair was brushed neatly back off her shoulders and caught with a blue ribbon; it lay like blue-black velvet on the white blouse. It was too early for the regular afternoon loafers, but I was willing to bet that there would be plenty of them when the news got around.

She noticed suddenly that I was staring at her and smoothed the skirt self-consciously over her hips. "Is it all right? I didn't know what to wear. I can't wear the student nurse uniform for half a year. Mrs. Thorne thought it would be all right."

"I'll bet she did. It's fine. You going to live at Thorne's?"

"Next week I move downtown to a place by the hospital. Mrs. Melotti, you know, who works in the finance, will rent me a room. She has plenty of room and I thought it was a good idea."

"I'll bet Mr. Melotti didn't put up much of a fight, either."

"Silly--Mrs. Melotti is a widow. Well, what shall I do first? I brought notebooks so I could write down what we do and then study it at night."

She got a notebook and pencil and sat at the desk, waiting.

"All right--take this down. On Monday afternoons we have two

sick calls. The first is for military personnel only--soldiers, that is. It's at two-thirty, sharp. Got that?"

She wrote furiously for a moment, then nodded. I walked back and forth in front of the desk and dictated: "First the patients report to the orderly room and get their names in the company sick-book. I'll show you that later. Got that? Okay, then they bring the book down here. We check the active medical records file on each patient--that's this file here--" I pointed--"in the order in which that man's name appears in the sick-book. The exact order; now that's important. Be sure to get that down. Got it?"

"Wait, wait. A little slower, please. Medical records file. Top door. All right."

"Top drawer; not door. D-r-a-w-e-r."

"Drawer. Okay."

I kept it up for forty-five minutes, thick and fast, and she filled several pages in the notebook with neat writing. Then I said, "Well, there you have it. Our complete afternoon schedule for each afternoon of the week."

She glanced back over the notes and closed the book. "What a lot to learn! I'll have to study hard tonight."

I sat on the corner of the desk and smiled at her. "Don't bother. That's the schedule, but nobody ever keeps it. People don't get sick on schedule. They wander in and out of here most any time of the day and in any old order."

She was bewildered. "You mean these aren't any good? All these notes?"

"I wouldn't say that--I think they're nice. You write a neat

hand. And the schedule you have there is very good. We'd love to follow it. That's the way we wish things were. But they never are."

Before I had finished speaking, I realized that she was hurt almost to the point of tears, and I suddenly felt cheap and cruel. I hoped she would cry or even better, scream and throw things, but she didn't. She picked up the notebook she had been using and put it on top of the unused one. She didn't look at me.

"I don't know very much," she said. "I've never worked around anybody but Grandfather. I didn't know you were just having fun with me. I thought I was supposed to write down all those things and remember them. Just tell me what I am supposed to do and I'll do it."

I dropped several points in my own estimation. "Look," I said, "I'm sorry, Carla. There won't be anybody around for half an hour; everybody who isn't working is taking an afternoon nap. Dave hardly ever comes over from the lab until after two-thirty unless I send for him. Tesfi can stick around and call us if anybody needs us. Let's go to the PX for a coke."

"No, if there isn't anything to do, I'll go back to Mrs. Thorne's. I thought there would be things to do. New things to learn. I don't want to sit around and drink cokes. I thought you could use me to help around here. Dave told me you were busy most of the time."

"There are things to do, plenty of them. If it's work you want, I can keep you busy."

"Making funny schedules?" she asked, but she smiled and I knew I was getting another chance, and that I was happy about getting it, though earlier in the day I had figured that running her off would be about the best thing I could do.

I started in earnest, then, teaching her what I would have taught a new man. She had a lot against her; most of the terms were new to her and she had to learn those and their abbreviations, as well as the records we kept, when to use which ones, and what to do with them when they had been completed.

But she had come to learn and to work. She was serious and business-like and methodical, and when I discovered that she actually wanted to be useful, I did everything I could to help her. She kept notes on everything, too, and since most of the work was routine and repetitive, I began to see that Dave had been right in setting his deadline, for by Friday, Carla knew what there was to be done and she had a complete set of notes on how to do it.

That week went by in a hurry, but the next one dragged. I worked around the dispensary Monday morning, and in the afternoon I went across to the hospital and fussed around cleaning and arranging things that didn't need it; we hadn't had a patient there since Louie.

There was nothing to do in the lab, and finally I took off my shoes and stretched out with a book on the bed where Louie had died; the window in that room looked out over the street, and from the bed I could see the main gate and the front of the dispensary. The rains were well under way and I watched the clouds that had broken into fleecy islands after the morning rain come together again and solidify and darken. A few large drops splattered on the macadam street between the hospital and the dispensary, and the main gate guard, who had been talking to somebody on the steps of the dispensary, made a dash for the guard shack. Suddenly the sharp outlines of the dispensary and the guard shack and the corner of the mess hall which I could see

from the window softened and blurred; the crisp lines of the white buildings against the darkened background wavered and ran and blended with each other in the heavy downpour.

It was a fine show but it didn't last long; the rains seemed to be shorter than usual that year. When the shower was over, I tried to read and then to nap a little but Dave had kept me so busy for a year that I'd gotten out of the habit of doing either.

Finally I gave up, put on my shoes, smoothed the bed, and walked over to the dispensary. There was one patient in the waiting room--a maintenance man from the station who had burned his knuckles with a soldering torch and was there to have the dressing changed--and three loafers, men on the night shift who had been awakened by the rain and had dropped in for coffee or coke. Carla was at my desk, bent over some paperwork. She looked up when I came, nodded, and went back to work. I asked her if she wanted some help, learned that she didn't, and poured myself a cup of coffee.

"Ain't you workin' here any more, Shannon?" one of the loafers asked.

"Only now and then. Doc is breaking in some new help. Haven't you heard? I'm one of the short-timers."

"Yeah, but that ain't for six months yet. No more than you do, it won't take six months to train a replacement," he replied.

One of the others said, "Looks to me like Doc made a good trade, anyway. The new help sure brightens up the joint. Nobody's gonna miss you."

If Carla heard what he said, she gave no sign. Tesfi came in after the man with the burned hand, flashed a smile at me, and went out

again. Two of the loafers left and three more came in. I was on my second cup of coffee when Dave came out of the examining room. Carla looked up when he came in; it was the first notice she had taken of anybody in the room.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"All through for the time being. Al hasn't been helping you, has he?"

"No. I'm doing it all myself." She apparently thought she owed me a smile, so I got one. "He asked me if he could help, but I think I can manage."

"Good. How's it feel, Al, to be in semi-retirement? Catching up on your reading?"

"All caught up. Is there anything to do in the lab?"

"Not now. I'm going to do some work over there for Dr. Delucca, though, as soon as I get time to get it under way. You can help with that if you want to. You don't have to."

"I'll help, the sooner the better. I'm bored stiff with nothing to do."

"Why don't you go up and see Harry? See what the latest rumor is in the supply branch."

"That's an idea," I said. "Not much of one, but an idea. Maybe we can work up a trip over the weekend."

"Can't do that--I can't, anyway. Maybe you guys can find somebody else to go with you. I just can't get away."

"Couldn't Delucca stand by for you?"

"Not this weekend. Anyway, it's too wet to hunt. You wouldn't dare leave the main highway."

"We could goof around Massawa. Maybe take a look at the plains south of there. See what the desert looks like in rainy season. We wouldn't have to go far from town."

"South of Massawa--down toward Uangabo?" I could see that the idea interested him, but he shook his head regretfully. "Not this week. Ask Mike if we could get south of Massawa during the rains, though, and maybe I can get Delucca to stand by in a couple of weeks."

Eventually I walked up to the signal supply office. Harry was very busy with the supply records of the stuff he had gotten off the ship, but he took time off to tell me of his great new plan, which was to start an export-import business in East Africa, operating out of Massawa. He apparently had done considerable thinking about it and had a file folder full of facts and figures.

"A thing like that will take quite a bit of capital," I said.

"I can raise it."

"I thought you didn't want to go into business. You told me once that you joined the army to get away from it."

"I wouldn't mind this kind of business. I can run it from here. It'll give me a chance to travel all over the Middle East. I've got a year and a half to do yet in the army, and I thought I'd try to get it started before I got out. If I can get something good going, maybe I can get Louise to come over to help."

That explains it, I thought; why the hell doesn't he just give up and go home to her? But I didn't say anything.

He said, "She might, you know. Say, why don't you take a discharge here and go to work for me? You know the country. Interested?"

"No. I don't know the country very well at all, and I don't know

anything about the export business. Besides, I still have five years to do on a six year hitch. I just reinlisted last year. Mike might be the man for you. He's got less than a year to do on the hitch he's on now, and he might be able to put together enough leave so that he could get a discharge before they send him home."

"That's right; he's got to go stateside under that new order, hasn't he? I'll ask him."

We talked some more but I could see that Harry wanted to get back to his records, so I left. As I was leaving, he told me to drop in again, and I promised to do it--the next afternoon.

I loafed in the headquarters offices the rest of the afternoon, ate a sandwich at the PX, and played liar's dice in the club until midnight. I told Mike that I'd been turned out to pasture in the afternoons and that after one day of it, I was ready to go back to work.

"Never thought I'd see that day," he said. "Dave's been a bad influence on you. He's ruined the best loafer this post ever had."

But I didn't get much sympathy from Mike, for he had the same problem as I had. Kettar put him on straight days, no more night work at all, five days a week. "They want to get used to running without me," Mike said. "And the hell of it is, Al, I think they can. What bothers me is that I don't think I can get used to running without them. I really miss being responsible for the whole works out there."

"Who did Kettar pick to replace you?"

"Nobody from here. He sent to the States for a replacement. Guess he figured that anybody who'd worked out there with me wouldn't be good enough for the job."

"Well, at least you got something to do all day. I'm through

by noon."

"I'm no better off," Mike said gloomily. "We keep most of our busy skeds at night. If I want a circuit in the daytime, I have to chase a private off it, and then there isn't any traffic to clear."

So I stayed late at the club, thinking I'd be able to nap the next afternoon, but as soon as the afternoon rain was over, I was fed up with the hospital and went bumming again. I hit the barber shop that afternoon, and the motor pool, I think, and finally ended up drinking three-two beer in the PX with a couple of sailors.

So it went, and by Friday I was fed to the ears; when Dave asked me to work Friday night going over the records Carla had been keeping all week I nearly kissed his hand in gratitude.

"See you at the club later," Mike said as we left the mess hall that evening.

"I'll be a little late. I've got some work to do."

"I thought Carla was doing it."

"Not all of it. Someone has to check what she's been doing. I'll be over if I can get away in decent time."

I did a thorough job, made a few minor corrections, left a couple of notes to myself so that I wouldn't forget to tell Carla about the few errors I had found, and was through by ten o'clock. I should have been tired, but I wasn't, so I started to the club. As I passed the non-com's quarters, I spotted a light in Mike's room and heard music through the open door, so I went in.

Mike was sitting in a steel folding chair, his feet up on his writing desk, drinking red wine from the bottle. There was an empty wine bottle in the waste basket.

On the desk was a homemade record player on which a worn V-disc was turning, spinning a worn tune called "Look Down That Lonesome Road." Mike was singing along with the record, "Look down, look down, thatlone--someroad, bum, bum, BE--foreyou travel ON. Look up, look up, andmeet your Maker, bum, bum, BE--fore . . ."

"What in the hell is this, revival hour?"

"Hey, old Al! Come on in. Have a drink." He had to shout over the noise of the record player.

"Throttle that thing down a little, will you? I thought you were going to the club. You got anything to drink besides wine?"

"That's a great song, Al. Great song. Look down that lonesome road. Good mood song, Al." He took the record off the player and got half a bottle of scotch from his locker. I didn't see any glasses so I drank from the bottle.

"I didn't think I could stand that club tonight. Grim came by. I guess he's over there now. You go on over--I think I'll stick around here. Maybe go downtown after while."

"I'll stay here, if you don't mind. Drinks are cheaper here. Maybe I'll go downtown with you later--unless you had something you wanted to do alone, of course."

"Not doing a thing and not going to do a thing except get quietly drunk. Maybe a little later I'll get boisterously drunk."

"You really hate to leave this place, don't you, Mike?"

"Anybody would who has been here as long as I have. But it's not leaving here that bothers me so much, Al. What worries me most is where I'll go and what I'll do when I leave. What in the hell will I do, Al?" He took another long drink of the wine.

"Oh, well, the army will take care of that. Probably send you to the Signal School at Fort Monmouth as an instructor, or maybe assign you to some division signal company in the States. You can get in a little garrison duty. With your rank, you'll probably be field first sergeant--spend two or three hours drilling the troop and loaf the rest of the day."

I meant to paint a rosy picture because I could tell that he was feeling low, but from his reaction to what I said, you'd have thought that I told him he was doomed to spend the rest of his career in the stockade.

"If they do that, I'm sunk! I couldn't drill troops, Al. Why, the only military formations I've ever stood were in the reception center. I never even took basic training."

I listened, first in disbelief and then with amusement that grew into hilarity, while Mike told me the story of his military career. He'd been in college doing graduate work in Italian and Spanish literature when the war broke out, and he enlisted immediately. In addition to his background in languages, Mike had operated a ham radio rig as a hobby; either in a rare burst of efficiency or by accident, the army matched his qualifications with his assignment and sent Mike to Asmara where he could use both his skill in Italian and his knowledge of radio. They sent him directly overseas, in fact, without training of any kind.

At Radio Marina, where the last thing a soldier needed to know was how to soldier, Mike had naturally been promoted, picking up what he needed to know about radio from manuals, directives, and other operators, until finally he had become the non-com in charge.

"But I never drilled even a squad in all my life," he said.

"I wouldn't know the first thing about it."

"Haven't they had any formations here since you've been here?"

"One. At the end of the war, the CO held a retreat formation. Divided the whole post up into platoons, had them practice in their off-duty time for two days, and closed down operations for three hours one evening while the ceremony was held. I was a platoon sergeant, but I got a staff sergeant from operations to take over for me during the practice sessions because I was busy at the station. I couldn't pull that during the ceremony, though, because they closed the station."

He took a long drink from the wine bottle and chuckled.

"So you were stuck with the platoon and made a mess of it."

"Hell no. I hid. In the boiler room right here in the non-com quarters. First Sergeant looking all over for me, and me snuggled up against the hot water heater, about to roast. Big, pot-gutted fellow named Quick was the first-striper then--he was mad as hell but I stayed out of his way for a week and he got over it."

He took another drink, tossed the empty wine bottle into the waste basket, and wiped his moustache with the back of his hand.

"The funny thing is," Mike went on, "nobody ever asked me why I didn't show up for the formation. Everybody wanted to know where I was, but I wouldn't tell and I've never told anybody until now."

He shook the scotch bottle reflectively but decided not to have one.

"You can learn to drill troops. There's nothing to it."

"Just the thought of it puts me in a panic. I'll never be able to do it, Al. I can't even think of it."

"Well, get out of the army, then. What were you going to do before the war came along?"

Mike grinned. "I intended to teach in college. You know, the quiet academic life, the ivy-covered halls, all that. I don't see me in that picture now, do you?"

"Why not? Sounds good to me. And if you can't drill troops, you'll have to do something."

"I'd have to go back to school for three or four years," Mike mused. "Why not, indeed? Maybe I could take up where I left off."

"Sure you could," I said. I didn't know any more about colleges than a hog does about Sunday, but I could see that the idea made him feel better.

We talked about it some more and then talked about his staying in Asmara for so long, almost growing into a legend there, just because he was afraid he'd have to drill troops if he left, and eventually Mike was in a mood where he could laugh about the whole thing and even promise that if he decided to get out, we would tell Wilson the story because it was the kind of story he would enjoy.

When the scotch bottle was empty, we decided to go downtown. Mike had reached the point where, I knew from drinking with him before, he would be both durable and unpredictable, and I was tight enough to go with him.

There were four gherrys at the main gate. We had a fine time selecting one, because all the drivers knew us and could gauge our degree of drunkenness accurately. I never saw a hack driver who couldn't; guys who have served in Japan tell me it's the same with ricksha men.

Mike settled the argument by staging a race among them, down to

the corner, around the traffic island in the middle of the intersection, and back to the main gate, the winner to get our trade for the evening. Mike gave five shillings each to the losers and we set out with the winner. His horse was blowing hard and one wheel on the gherry wobbled crazily because the driver, in making his turn around the island, had run up on the curb and bent the spokes, so I gave him five shillings too.

The driver wanted to run the horse some more but Mike wouldn't let him so we plodded along at a slow walk, but that was all right; it was a beautiful night, blue-black and full of stars, clean, cool, and fresh from the rains.

We stopped at every cafe that was open and had coffee or brandy or both. We danced with the girls at the Odeon and at the Modernissimo. We said hello to Broulon at the Flamingo and got a drink on the house.

Somewhere in the gray of the morning we stopped at a cafe for steak and eggs, which we ate with the only other customer, a captain in the British Administration Constabulary named Wilcox. He was very drunk, almost incoherent at first. Mike was drunk, too, but not incoherent. I was not as drunk as either of them, having stood short on several drinks through the evening, but I was not as sober as I'd have liked, either.

Wilcox had to go to Massawa; he was to meet the District Officer there that afternoon, and he didn't want to go.

"They order one about, you know," he complained. "Their slightest whim, you know. For half a bloody penny I'd chuck the whole thing."

"I know," Mike said. "Same with us. I have to go back to the States. So does Al. I know how they order you around. Can't leave

you alone for a minute."

"I can't stand orders. It's psychological. Comes from being a prisoner. I was a prisoner, you know. Russians had me."

"I didn't know," Mike said. "Sorry to hear that. Glad you got away, of course. I didn't know the Russians took prisoners."

"Of course they did. Had all of us. Whole constabulary. Except the DO. He wasn't a prisoner. That's why he orders us about so. If he only knew; if he'd only been a prisoner too."

I thought he was going to cry; so did Mike. Mike said, "Never mind. We'll go to Massawa with you. We'll take some brandy, won't we, Al? Nice drive. It's not bad there this time of the year."

I said sure we would go and Wilcox felt better; so good, in fact, that he finished his own food and speared an egg off Mike's plate and ate it.

"They fry them too done," he complained. "Look how hard the bloody egg is."

"Good thing, though," Mike said. "You'd have gotten it all over the table if it had been soft."

"True. Too bloody true. Always a bright side, eh? If one but looks for it."

We piled into the gherry, the driver complaining all the time about something. I thought he wanted more money and tried to give him a ten shilling note but Wilcox wouldn't let me. While we argued about it, Mike took the reins and urged the horse into a tired trot. We went up over the curb and against a palm tree; the bent wheel came off and the gherry tipped over on its side, spilling us out onto the sidewalk.

Wilcox cursed the driver and was going to beat him, but we talked him out of it. I felt sorry for him so I gave him the ten shilling note and all the change I had, and Mike emptied his pockets of change and gave him that. Wilcox, getting into the spirit of things, gave him a bottle of brandy which Mike had been carrying and which had somehow survived the smash-up.

We walked to Wilcox's quarters through the still morning air, heavy and sweet with moisture and with the smell of bougainvillaea, and I slept heavily in a chair until Wilcox's driver came with the truck, a stubby one-ton Bedford.

Mike shook me awake. "Move it, daddeo, we're diggin' out."

"You speak American slang very well," Wilcox said approvingly.

"I should," Mike said. "I'm a linguist. One of the best.

Very well known in linguistic circles before the war."

"You must teach me American slang, Mike. You really must."

We waited in the rain at the roadblock while the morning convoy made up, Mike and I in the back of the truck and Wilcox up front with the driver. I went to sleep again; when I awoke, Wilcox was in the back with us, sleeping on a blanket on the floor.

Mike and I drank beer and swam in the pool at the hotel while Wilcox went about his business. We were supposed to leave for Asmara in convoy after lunch Sunday, so we thought we would kill the morning by driving around in the flats south of Massawa. The Italian driver wouldn't go, so Mike drove.

We scattered a small herd of gazelle out south of Massawa on a high plain and Mike cut out a large buck and tried to maneuver close enough to give Wilcox a shot at it with his service revolver. Wilcox

couldn't hit it though Mike brought him close enough several times; finally the old Bedford overheated from being run so much in third gear and we had to give up the chase. Some of the water boiled out of the radiator. None of us had brought water because we were running on beer but we didn't want to waste that in the radiator of the Bedford, so we made our way back to Massawa in easy stages, running until the engine overheated, and then stopping and drinking beer until it had cooled enough to run again.

We missed the convoy and the Italian driver wouldn't budge out of Massawa without protection so we stayed overnight and caught the Monday convoy. I thought we ought to call the post to let somebody know where we were but Mike said the hell with them, let them worry, and besides the telephone lines were undoubtedly down and the telephone was all the way across the lobby.

When I got back to the dispensary Monday evening, Carla was sitting at the desk in the waiting room; there seemed to be nobody else around.

"I'm back," I said. "Where's Dave?"

"He's in the lab. He had some things to do there; then he's going to take me downtown to dinner."

"Sounds great. I'll go with you. Somebody will have to go along to drive."

She shrugged. "Nobody went with us last night. Dave drove."

"He took you out to dinner last night? And drove the jeep? I don't believe it."

"He did. That is, he didn't drive the jeep; we took the wagon-- what you call it? Station wagon. The one that looks like a flag."

"Wilson's VIP wagon? The Buick? To haul you to dinner?"

"Not to dinner; that's tonight. Last night we went to a movie. Dave's a good driver."

"I wouldn't know. Coffee all gone, huh?" She nodded and flipped over a page in the magazine she had been reading.

"You could get some coffee and a sandwich at the PX," she said, glancing at the clock above the door.

"Yeah, I guess I'll do that. Did anybody miss me over the weekend?"

She looked up from the magazine, puzzled. "Miss you? You went hunting with Mike, didn't you? That's what Dave said."

She began reading again. I didn't leave, and in a minute she said, "Have you ever been to Atlanta, in Georgia, Al?" She pronounced it geor-gee-ah; I didn't correct her. "It looks pretty here in the pictures. It's warm there all year, too, it says here. Dave likes warm places, did you know that? He doesn't like the cold. I bet he would like Atlanta, in Georgia."

"He doesn't like cities. Did he tell you that?"

She frowned. "He says they're cold, like the winter. Isn't that silly? Is Atlanta too big, do you think?" She asked the question seriously and sat poised with a page in the magazine half-turned until I answered.

"Much too big, I would say." She nodded in agreement, still frowning, and finished turning the page. She was still looking at me so I went on. "Pick a very small place," I advised. "Pick a place with less than a thousand people--less than a hundred, if you can find one. Uangabo--there's a town with possibilities. Small, warm, . . ."

She looked away and began to flip the pages of the magazine.

Dave came in the front door of the dispensary whistling, stopped in the door of the waiting room, and said, "You're back."

I didn't deny it. He said, "Have you had anything to eat? Carla and I are going to eat downtown--want to go with us?"

"No, I guess not. I'm pretty tired. I'll grab a sandwich in the PX and go on to bed. Mike and I have been hunting."

"Yeah, that's what I heard. Where'd you go?"

"Oh, south of Massawa. Didn't get anything. It looks like good country, though."

"South of Massawa? Were you down by Uangabo? No, of course not; Mike wouldn't go that far, would he? Isn't there a river down there that runs in the rainy season? How far south did you go?"

"I'll tell you about it later. Carla's hungry and so am I and I want to get to the PX before it closes."

"It doesn't close for another two hours. What's the country like down there? Did you see any people? Any villages?"

"We didn't see anything much. We didn't get too far south. Look, I'm tired; I'll see you guys in the morning. Have a good dinner."

"We're going to have to do some hunting as soon as the rains are over," Dave said.

Carla had worked her way through the magazine and was back to the pictures of Atlanta, in Georgia.

"It's something to think about," I said.

CHAPTER XII

It was an Italian named Nick Costa who started us hunting again. Costa worked in the post motor pool, one of the places where I hung out during the long afternoons. He had been to Uangabo.

Nick was born on his father's farm northwest of Massawa. Before the war and for as long as Nick could remember, his father had traded for leopard hides and python skins among the natives, making trips with mule and camel trains over the desert and through the hills at the foot of the plateau; as a boy, Nick had gone more than once with his father to trade with the people of Uangabo.

When you leave Massawa (he told us) going south, there is a road, which after a few kilometers becomes a trail, and finally only a track. On the left there is the sea, and on the right the mountains, mostly rocky cliffs, and there is a narrow strip of lowland between. The land is mostly that way to the salt marshes above Assab, two hundred miles south, Nick thought, though he had not been far past Uangabo and didn't know anybody who had been.

Eight kilometers south of Massawa there is an abandoned mica mine that had been worked in Nick's time; that's where the road ends, and Mike and I had been that far with Wilcox. Twenty kilometers south of that there is the ruin of an old mud and rock fort. The British say the Italians built it, but Nick thought it had been there when his father came to the country. His father told him once that it had been a collection point for Arab slavers.

From the fort south there is no road; the mountains come in close to the sea, as close as half a kilometer in some places, Nick said, and the narrow strip of plains is cut by deep wadis with crumbling, soft rock banks. The strip of cut-up flatland gradually widens; about fifty kilometers from Massawa there is a wide, palm-fringed riverbed, running out of the mountains into the sea. The lower part of it is flooded by tidal waters, and in the upper part the sand is soft and always moist just below the surface.

"Dat's da wors' of it," Nick said about the river. "Git across da wadis an' still dere's da river. Camels okay dere, mules not so good, but can go. We tookt dem cross. Trucks? Maybe, but it's not be easy."

One evening in the dispensary Nick went over some maps of the area with Mike and me but the maps were of little help. The best of the lot was an Air Force navigation map and even on it the whole coastal strip between Massawa and Assab was circled in red and marked "Terrain features and elevations approximate."

Finally Nick sketched a map for us. South of the big riverbed Nick's map showed a semi-circular plain with the mountains swinging in an arc back from the sea for perhaps twenty kilometers, then around to the coast again. Nick marked the village about ten kilometers in from the coast at the southern extremity of the plains, and explained that it lay in one of several valleys that ran into the mountains there. He thought that the distance from the river in a straight line across the plains to the village was about forty-five or fifty kilometers.

Dave came in while we were working on the map and listened carefully while Costa talked about the country. When he asked Costa

about the people, I knew we would be hunting before long.

Nick was evasive about the people. They spoke a language similar to that of the Gallas of Southern Ethiopia, they farmed some in their valleys, and they were the best hunters of all the people he and his father had traded with. He obviously liked them and when Mike pointed out that they had a reputation of being treacherous and dangerous, Nick defended them almost angrily, and finally told us how the people of Uangabo had acquired their bad reputation.

They were pagans, he told us, and before the war, the Italians had made an attempt to educate and convert all the pagan people in Eritrea, so his father had taken a young priest with them into the village of the Uangabos and had helped the priest establish himself there. The Costas visited Uangabo about three times a year and from the first the priest seemed to be having some success, enough so that by the end of the first year, the village had become almost evenly divided between Christians and pagan hold-outs.

The story of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection became the center of the controversy in the village. It was a sad thing, Nick thought, to see the people who had been so contented split into angry factions. His father begged the priest to come away with them but the priest wouldn't. Nick remembered the bitterness of his father after one trip; the haul of hides had been meager and his father blamed the priest because the Uangabos were devoting more time to arguing than they were to hunting.

The Costas made one more trip to Uangabo after that; Nick told of it in rapid Italian with his eyes on the floor, and left the dispensary while Mike was translating it for us. On their last trip--in

1937 or 1938, Mike thought, when Nick was still in his teens--they arrived at Uangabo to find the priest dead, his body entombed in a cave in the hills. The Uangabos had solved their differences by putting the priest to a test; they had crucified him, put his body in a cave, and rolled a rock across the entrance. When they rolled the rock away after three days and found the body there, a little high but otherwise unchanged, even the most ardent converts were willing to admit that they had been duped.

"An ugly story," Mike concluded. "Probably the ugliest I ever heard."

"Yes," Dave agreed. "I think disillusionment is about the nastiest thing that happens to human beings."

I thought about that for a few moments. "At least he didn't have to live with his disillusionment long. Considering how he died, though, I don't suppose he'd look on that as a real break."

"The priest, you mean? Well, he had his martyrdom, of course. I was thinking of the people of the village--what they must have felt after having done what they did--a terrible thing, almost too terrible to think of--and then to find out that it hadn't changed anything, that things were just as they had been before."

Mike said, "Well, they settled their differences, anyway."

Dave snorted and said with a bitterness strange for him, "Yes, differences they didn't even have in the beginning and wouldn't have had if they had looked at things as they are instead of insisting on seeing them as they appear to be."

"It was the priest's fault, then?" I couldn't resist asking.

"The priest's fault? Of course not. It wasn't anybody's

fault."

He paused and studied the map for a moment. "Anyway, we know something about the place now. We can have a look at it, can't we, Mike? When the rains are over?"

Mike said, "Costa didn't tell you the rest of the story. His father reported the death of the priest but didn't say how he died, not at first; then one night when he was drunk, he spilled the whole story. When it got around Massawa, which was the capital of the colony then, not very many people believed it. Most of them thought there had been foul play of some kind, and the police believed that Nick's father was involved, so they pulled him in and locked him up while they sent a patrol to investigate. The old man died shortly after they locked him up, and that should have been an end to it, but it wasn't, because the patrol disappeared."

"Disappeared? What was it, an infantry patrol?"

"Trucks; five of them. You've heard the story, haven't you, Al?"

Dave was skeptical. "Their trucks broke down, maybe, and they tried to make it back on foot? Or mutiny? Desertion?"

Mike smiled, enjoying himself. "If they deserted, they had to go somewhere. Same if they mutinied. You can't pull a truck through the mountains. They either had to go south to Assab or come back north to Massawa--and they didn't do either. They weren't a bunch of Milano playboys, either; they were regular colonial troops, and whatever you can say about the way they fought during the war, they knew their way around in the desert, and they were well equipped."

"Come on, Mike--you'll be asking me to believe they were done

away with by witchcraft. That was about the beginning of the war-- they probably ran into some bad luck somewhere and nobody looked for them"

Mike stroked his moustache and considered that for a moment.

"I agree with you in one way; it wasn't witchcraft. There's a rational explanation, no doubt. The Italians did fly several missions down there, though, and didn't find anything. I don't know that there ever was a ground search for them. They left not too long before the rains that year--it's possible that the trucks got trapped in the river and finally washed out to sea. But what happened to the men? I've always thought that they probably missed Uangabo and met with some kind of trouble in the country south of there."

"Wouldn't somebody have seen them from the air, then?" I asked.

"Not necessarily. There are some high-altitude flights over the area, but you can't see anything for the dust and heat-haze. That's why the maps are so bad. Flying it at low altitude would be a tough job in the wind and rough air and heat. I'm not surprised that the Italians didn't find anything. But the disappearance of that patrol on top of what happened to the priest built up an air of mystery about Uangabo. There are still Italian mammas around here who use the Uangabos as bogies to scare their children into behaving."

"Somebody told me the British used to keep a native constable down there," Dave said, "so they apparently don't think there's anything so extraordinary about the people."

"I wouldn't say that--the British keep constables in some fairly extraordinary places. Did anybody ever tell you why they quit sending constables to Uangabo?"

"Let me guess--the witches got them. They kept taking constables down there and never bringing any back. The constables disappeared--probably out playing pinochle with the lost patrol."

Mike grinned again. "I heard a rational explanation for the disappearing constables from a British inspector that used to be assigned to that area. He thought they threw away their clothing and other gear and turned native. He'd been to Uangabo twice, and he claimed that if he had only had the right complexion, he'd have stayed there himself."

Dave folded the hand-drawn map inside his air navigation map, slipped them both in his pocket, and said, "Well, how about it? Will you try it?"

"I'll go as far as I think we can go safely," Mike said. "I'm so sick of that station in the daytime that I'll do almost anything to get away from it for a while. We ought to wait until at least a week after the last rain, though, to be sure that the run-off has got down that river. Let's plan on it as soon after the rains as we can. The first week we can get off."

"A whole week? Think we'll need that long? You can't make it, can you, Dave?" I said.

"I'll make it. You get Harry fired up and ready to go. If I can't talk Delucca into standing by for a week, I'll never see another man as long as I live."

The rainy season cooperated with us by being unusually short that year, but everything else seemed to be against us. Dave had trouble getting Delucca to stand by for him because of an unexpected shortage of doctors in the Italian hospital; a week's leave was out of the

question but Delucca finally promised to take Dave's duty for four days.

Harry agreed to go but with no real enthusiasm. He had no enthusiasm for anything except his supply records, which he dutifully worked on eight hours a day, and his plans for an export-import business, on which he spent the remainder of his waking hours. He had decided to actually get the business under way on a small scale while he was still in the army and when it was operating and showing a profit, he would use it as bait to attract his wife. He didn't put it quite that way, of course.

Things weren't going very well at the station, either. The place ran without Mike at the helm, but it ran from minor crisis to minor crisis, and each crisis that took place while Mike was off duty meant a trip to the station for Kettar because nobody else was willing to make a decision.

Kettar blamed Mike for most of the difficulty at the station and though he did not openly say so, he showed his hostility in several little ways, and at least on big way; that was by trying to get Mike's weapons carrier taken away from him. He said nothing to Mike about it, but sent a note to the motor sergeant stating that Sergeant Clementi was no longer on twenty-four hour call at the station and would "no longer require the vehicle on a permanent basis."

Mike fumed and fretted for two days but he dutifully checked his weapons carrier out each morning and back in when he came from the station in the evening, though he hadn't checked it out or made a trap-ticket on it in five years. On the third morning, however, when he went to the motor pool to get his truck, he found that it

had been checked out to Kettar's driver.

Mike didn't go to work that day; he loafed around the post until Wilson was comfortably settled in the club, and then he asked Wilson to be relieved from duty at the station and assigned temporary duty on the post until he shipped out.

Wilson didn't relieve him, of course. Wilson wanted to leave the post with as good a record as possible and he had an idea of what might happen among the men at the station if word got around that Mike had gotten a raw deal. So Wilson wrote an order to the motor officer directing him to assign the weapons carrier to Mike permanently and to disregard all other directives on the subject. When the truck came in that night, Mike was waiting for it, and that was the end of that.

When Mike submitted his request for leave, Kettar recommended disapproval but the request was approved over Kettar's recommendation on the grounds that Clementi had so much leave coming that he was losing two and a half days a month. That was Crimmons' work.

Kettar came into the dispensary early one morning a few days after Mike applied for leave. Dave had just come from breakfast and I was drinking my first cup of coffee.

Kettar was defensive but determined. "I understand that you intend to be gone from the post for several days, Doctor," he said.

"Four," Dave said. "I tried to arrange for more but couldn't do it. All work and no play makes a dull boy, they say. I expect you are here to make sure there will be adequate medical service on the post while I'm away."

"I believe I have that right, as executive officer."

"I'm sure you have, not only as exec officer, but on behalf of

your family, too. You have the right and I would say the obligation. I'm pleased to be able to tell you that I've been able to secure the services of a man who is not only a fine doctor but is also an expert in local diseases--really a much more capable man than I, myself."

"What will happen if somebody gets seriously ill?" Kettar asked. "Will this doctor be around the post day and night."

"He'll be on call. He surely will. And if anyone should be seriously hurt or should need to be hospitalized, the facilities downtown will be employed, just as they would be if I were here." Dave drew his eyebrows down, narrowed his eyes, and pursed his lips in studied concentration. "I can't think of anything we've overlooked. Can you, Sergeant Shannon?"

I was so engrossed in Dave's act that I almost missed my cue. "Oh, no Sir. No, I think we've provided for every exigency."

Dave applauded with his eyes and said to Kettar, "Can you think of anything we've overlooked, Major?"

Kettar admitted that he couldn't, and guessed he'd better be going as he had work to do at the station.

"Well, thanks for dropping by," Dave said. "You know, nobody seems to take much interest in our work. It's our job, and we do it willing, of course, but it is gratifying to know now and then that somebody cares about what we're doing--know what I mean? And you can assure the other married men on the post that their families are medically secure at all times."

We watched him leave the dispensary, get into his jeep, and drive through the main gate.

Then Dave said, "Where in the world did you get that 'exigencies'?"

I was afraid you were laying it on too thick."

"I read a lot of Rex Stout. And talk about me laying it on-- what about that medically secure crap you were dishing out? Sounds like something Kettar himself might say."

We had decided among ourselves, Dave and Mike and I, to keep our mouths shut about where we were going. Actually, any American who planned to go off the main roads into out of the way districts was supposed to get the permission of the District Officer, and while it was generally understood that the men from Radio Marian had a kind of blanket permission to hunt in the usual places, both Mike and I felt sure that the permission did not extend to Uangabo.

That it was the worst kept secret in the history of Radio Marina was not the fault of the men on the post. They spoke of it only in lowered voices--at least when I was around--and treated the thing as some sort of conspiracy. Guys would lean over my desk, look right and left, and whisper in my face, "When you leavin'? Got a map of the place? What do you suppose it's like down there?"

Even Major Wilson seemed more close-mouthed than usual the night he motioned me over to his table at the club about a week before we were to go.

"Did you and the Doc get your leaves all set? Let's see-- it's next weekend you're going, isn't it? Got the vehicles all set? Everything you need?"

I said yes, figuring that covered everything.

"Kettar's not happy about you guys going--you know that?"

Wilson flicked an ash off his cigarette, looked around the table at Nelson and Bowers, and went on, "He heard a rumor that you were

trying to get to a place somewhere down there that no white man's ever been to."

"That's not true," I said.

"Not quite, but pretty close to true, isn't it? Anyway, he wanted me to stop you."

"Are you going to?"

"No. I might have if I didn't know I'd be leaving this place before long, but I told Kettar that you knew what you were doing. Do you?"

"I think so."

"I wish you'd make it a little stronger," he said. "Kettar said he thought I was showing deplorable lack of judgement. You aren't showing deplorable lack of judgement, are you, Shannon?"

"We can take care of ourselves."

"Well, I hope so."

I got up to leave. Bowers said, "Good luck," and Nelson seconded that by smiling over his drink.

CHAPTER XIII

We finally got away, leaving early in the morning in Mike's weapons carrier, which had a winch on it, and a jeep, also with a winch, that the boys in the motor pool had gone over carefully and thoroughly from the tires up for me.

We were in Massawa before noon and stopped briefly at Administration Headquarters there. The DO was a fellow named Woodruff whom I knew and who had a drinking acquaintance with Mike. Dave told him that we were going to hunt down toward the old fort near the river and when we expected to return.

"Good enough, Captain," he said. "And, Mike, stay out of the sand in the river, eh? Especially near the coast. It looks hard as a metal road, but put a lorry on it and you're in to the bloody axle before you can wink."

"What's it look like up the river, up toward the mountains?" Mike asked.

"Well, the river runs right up into the mountains, of course, four or five miles back from the coast. I suppose the sand is better there, but the banks are too steep for vehicles. There's a good fringe of palms and undergrowth a mile or so back from the sea. Good shooting, I should think. Boar, dik-dik. No kudu. Leopard when you can see them; they lie up in holes in the rock. There's sure to be water in most of the water holes now. And move nights after dark. Best come back this way fifteen or twenty miles."

"Shiftas?" Harry asked.

"Too right. Worst cutthroats of a bad lot. Take care, and I'll be looking for you to come through Monday."

We took his advice with straight faces and left, going south out of Massawa easily over smooth ground past the mica mine and the old fort. We wasted no time exploring and we ignored the herds of gazelle that grazed within stalking distance of the road. Harry, in the jeep with me, begged for a shot, but I wouldn't stop. "We'll take them on the way back," I promised.

Just south of the old fort we ran into the first of the wadis Nick had described. Mike swung the weapons carrier to the left toward the sea, and Harry and I followed in the jeep. We stuck to the north bank of the wadi all the way to the sea, where we were able to drive down to the sandy strip of beach and turn south again, across the mouth of the wadi.

It was easy going on the beach, we discovered, and Mike thought we could make it along the beach even at high tide. The sand was different from desert sand, coarser and firmer, better packed. Now and then we would come to the outlet of a wadi which was flooded with tide water. When that happened, we would have to turn back into the desert between wadis and find a place where the banks were low enough to allow us to cross. This took a lot of our time, but there wasn't any other way to do it. Once we tried to drive the jeep through the water at the mouth of a wadi, but got it stuck in the sand, which was finer and looser than the sand along the beach. We spent as long winching it out as we would have in looking for a better crossing, and after that we didn't try to cross the flooded places.

By mid-afternoon the wadis across our trail seemed to be narrower and not so steep; we were able to cross most of them quite a way back from the sea, and not long after that we ran out of them completely. The country south of the wadis rose very gradually and we saw that it was actually a low headland running out of the mountains to the sea. Though it was cut up somewhat by erosion, the washouts ran nearly parallel to our trail and we were able to make good speed.

When we reached the crest of the headland we could see the other side, a gradual and apparently smooth slope stretching down to a dark green line of palms marking the big river. An easy half-hour's drive brought us to the edge of the palm fringe.

We got out of the trucks there and worked our way on foot through the fringe of forest to the river. It was much wider than I had expected, perhaps half a mile wide at the place where we entered it. From where we stood, which appeared to be about half way between the mountains and the sea, we could see no bend in the river; above us the riverbed narrowed and the palm fringe gave way to rocky cliffs. Below us we could see only flat golden sand in the riverbed all the way to the sea. We guessed that the total length of the river from where it came out of the mountains to its mouth was not more than four or five miles.

It was getting late by this time and we decided to make camp where we were. Dave and I set about making a camp while Harry and Mike hunted up the river along the bank. We heard shots shortly after they had gone, and in a few minutes they were back with three dik-dik and an enthusiastic report about the abundance of game they had seen.

We cleaned the dik-dik, quartered them, and pan-fried them like

rabbit.

"Think we ought to move before we make camp for the night?"

I asked Mike when we had eaten.

"I don't know. I sure didn't see any signs that there had been anybody around here recently. Where this river comes out of the mountains can't be very far from the Massawa road, though. It stands to reason that the shiftas along the road would come back through the mountains and camp along the river. There's plenty of water all along the river right now, and probably water holes even in the middle of the dry season. Maybe we ought to move."

None of us wanted to break camp. Dave said, "Let's put the fire out, and when it get dark we can see whether there are any fires up the river. If there aren't any, let's stay here."

We all agreed; a breeze had sprung up from the sea in the early twilight and now it blew cool and smelling of brine through the palms which towered over us. A pleasant laziness seized us. We put out the fire and lay talking as darkness came on. After while Harry and I walked out into the riverbed. There was no moon yet, but the sand lay amazingly white beneath our feet, set off against the black of the palm fringe. We could see no fire light in any direction. The mountains loomed black against the night sky, seeming much closer than they had appeared in daylight, black but not ominous--almost friendly, like a warm covering blanket.

We were up with the first light of morning, but it took us most of the morning to cross the river. The sand was crusted and beneath the firm, dry crust was soft, wet sand which gripped the tires of our trucks like thick glue. In places the crust held and the

going was easy, but in other places it broke like rotten ice. When it broke, the trucks dropped through to their axles and had to be winched out.

We soon discovered that as long as the vehicle was moving, the crust would generally hold the weight; stop it for a moment and it would go through. We leap-frogged the trucks across, first running one out until it got stuck or until it reached the limits of the winch cable, then using it as an anchor to get the other one moving; once a truck was moving it was usually able to go until it had by-passed the first truck, and then we would use it as the anchor.

It was hard work and very hot. We thought we might go up the river with one of the trucks to see if the sand was firmer up there, but we were afraid to separate the vehicles by more than the length of a winch cable, so we worked in the sun all morning, resting now and then in the sand in the shade of the trucks. The green palms stretched in dark, cool lines before and behind us, but they might as well have been in China for all the good they did us.

By noon we reached the south bank of the river. We were exhausted, our faces burned from the reflection off the sand, and our clothes dripped with perspiration which would not dry in the humid air. We lay in the shade of the palms and ate hard bread and canned tomatoes. I could have stayed there all afternoon, but in an hour or so Dave was restless and ready to go.

"We've still got the plains to cross," Dave said, looking at his dirty old Air Force map, which by this time he had virtually memorized. "The map shows a kind of half-moon basin, maybe thirty miles from here to the other side. The mountains seem to drop back from the coast a

long way, but that's just somebody's guess. What do you think-- swing around to our right and follow the river and the mountains around the plains, or cut straight across it?

Harry was looking at the map, too. "We don't know exactly where Uangabo is, except that it's across the plains somewhere at the foot of the mountains. If we cut across and miss it, which we could by several miles, we'll have to run up and down the foothills hunting it. I think we ought to stick with the mountains all the way."

"Harry's right," Mike said. "We've got to be back here and ready to cross the river by noon tomorrow if we're going to make it back to Asmara by Monday night. Even then, that's not allowing for any trouble. Let's play it safe."

Dave reluctantly agreed and we drove out of the shade of the palms and up onto the plain. The ground rose away from the river and the sand gave way to gravel and then in a few hundred yards to hardened lava flow. The trucks went well enough on it, but it was very rough.

It was hot, hotter than any place I'd ever been before. Tiny whirl-winds whipped the red lava-dust in thin spouts across the plain, and now and then they spun across our path or darted toward us and then flitted capriciously away. The trucks over-heated and had to be stopped for ten or fifteen minutes out of the hour to cool. There was no shade, no trees or rock outcroppings, only the bare hard lava, dark red and so hot under the sun that I could feel it through the soles of my boots when we stopped to rest. Perspiration dried the moment it hit the dry air, leaving our shirts caked white with salt.

The light was strange on that plain; north of Massawa it had been blue, icy blue even in the heat of the desert--here it was hot

red and gold, the color of light off molten metal.

But we made good time when we were running, and by mid-afternoon we had run around the western edge of the plain and were turned back toward the sea.

We reached Uangabo late in the afternoon. It lay in a niche in the mountains, what would have been called in the American Southwest a horse-shoe canyon, half a mile deep and two or three hundred yards wide, elevated slightly above the floor of the plain.

Most of the village already lay in the evening shadow of the surrounding mountains, cool and inviting, and we stared at it from the heat and glare of the plain like hungry men looking at a plate of ham and eggs. I realized at that moment that it was the challenge of getting there which had brought me; I hadn't expected to find anything at the end of the trip but another desert village. Uangabo was remote, difficult, perhaps impossible, to reach; I'd believed that, but I hadn't believed in the air of mystery that surrounded the place, or that it was special or different or at all worth going to. If cracker-jacks came in seamless steel boxes, there would still be some people who'd buy them, not for the penny whistle inside, but just for the challenge of getting them open.

But I stared in amazement that afternoon and began to realize that the prize was actually worth the effort.

Most startling of all the amazing things about that valley was the stream which watered it; a stream which dropped in a spectacular waterfall out of the rocks at the far end of the valley into a deep pool at the foot of the rocks, overflowed the pool, and ran down the center of the valley and out into the lava plain to the southeast

along the base of the hills, spreading out and gradually disappearing into holes in the rocks, as we later learned.

Maize grew in tilled strips on either side of the stream up the whole length of the valley. Back of the maize fields there was a growth of low, thick bushes interlaced with pathways standing out sharply white against the green bush. Behind the bush and very close to the canyon walls were grass houses--the bee-hive shaped grass huts that are common in South Africa but very rare in Eritrea.

Only Dave seemed unsurprised at what lay before us; he alone had expected to find something at Uangabo, I think, and he prodded us on, eager to explore the place but not surprised to find it worth exploring.

We drove into the shade of the canyon wall and as far as we could go up the stream without driving over the planted fields. The village supported about two hundred people, I guessed, and though they had all been out of sight when we first arrived, what seemed to be the whole population was around our trucks within a few minutes, laughing, waving, and trying to make themselves understood.

Mike and Dave stood on the front bumper of the weapons carrier and tried to talk to the people, Mike having a go in Italian and Arabic, and Dave trying the Amheric he had picked up from Tesfi. The crowd would listen respectfully to each of them for a moment, then they would all start in at once in their own language.

I stood on the running board of the weapons carrier, laughing at the whole thing. Once I waved them all to silence and pointed to Mike. "He's a very skilled linguist," I announced in English. "Very well known in linguistic circles before the war. Listen closely to

what he says, now."

They seemed to be impressed and listened solemnly for a moment but Mike grinned and said nothing; for once, he was out of languages.

Harry had a try in very bad French and I thought we ought to give up and use sign language, but I was in no hurry to do anything; the people were a fine lot to look at--somewhat taller than the desert people we usually hunted with, and considerable heavier; better fed, it seemed to me. The adults wore few clothes and the children wore none at all; their bodies were black and muscular, unmarred by tattooing or the hideous scarring that was common to all the other people I had seen around Asmara.

I looked for a chief among them, but I couldn't see anybody who appeared to have an advantage over any of the others in social prestige. On the outer fringe of the mob around the trucks was a group of older men, five or six in number, who, while they smiled with amusement at the antics of the others, did not join in the general clamor. I thought they might represent some sort of official village leadership, and I watched them, trying to catch the eye of one of them.

Then I noticed in the group of older men a little man, gray-headed and stooped and considerably smaller than the others. At the same moment, he looked directly at me and I was startled to recognize Abdu, the old one-eyed hunter from Ademdeme.

Before he could look away, I shouted at him and motioned him forward, and he came reluctantly, half pushed by the rest of his little group. When they reached the running board of the truck where I stood, the others drew aside a little from Abdu and looked expectantly at him, somewhat in the manner of proud parents waiting expectantly for

their talented but shy child to perform for company.

"Abdu, you old son of a bitch! Where did you come from?"

The old man glanced briefly and balefully at me with his good eye, then glared sullenly at the ground. The crowd became quiet, and Mike from his perch on the front bumper of the truck poured a stream of Italian at the old man. Abdu answered slowly, obviously displeased at seeing us there.

Harry left the jeep and came over to us. "What in the hell's the matter with him?" he asked.

"Wanted to keep this place to himself, I guess," Mike said.

"Well, see if you can get him to act as an interpreter for us," Dave said. "Promise him whatever it takes to get him to talk for us."

After a few words with Mike, Abdu started off along a path through the bush. Mike motioned us to follow. The old man guided us to a grass hut built against the side of the cliff. It was dusk by that time and the people of the village had gone about their business except for a few men who stayed with us. Some of these built a fire in front of the hut.

Abdu explained that we could use the hut for the night, so Harry and I made a trip back down the path for food and our gear. Only then did it occur to me that we had left everything including our guns in the trucks; I remembered Mike's saying that the Uangabos had a reputation for treachery and I smiled to myself. I had never felt safer; I didn't think we had anything they wanted.

I lit the Coleman lantern, hung it in the doorway of the hut, and began brewing a large pot of coffee, while Harry heated some canned meat and beans in a skillet and laid out bread and tins of jam. Mike

and Dave had flattered and bribed Abdu into a cooperative mood and they kept him busy answering questions about the place.

The men from the village sat and talked quietly among themselves and watched us without seeming to watch. They left one at a time until only three remained. I am sure none of them had seen a Coleman lantern before, or beans or spoons or half a dozen other things we had with us, but they showed only a polite interest in the things. I gave them plates and spoons and motioned to the big skillet of food, and after watching us carefully, they each dipped out a small portion and ate it, more from curiosity and courtesy than from hunger. We didn't see any hungry people at Uangabo.

It was cool there that evening, cool enough to make the blanket in my bedroll welcome, and I fell asleep inside the hut while the rest of the group talked outside by the fire, thinking to myself that I would be up early to start a fire and cook breakfast.

I awoke, however, to the smell of wood smoke and the sound of the stream. Through the door of the hut I saw Dave moving around the fire, and I hurried out to help him.

Up and down the valley columns of smoke rose straight from morning cooking fires up through the still cool air out of the shadow of the canyon into the sunlight above. To the north the plain glowed hot and red in the morning sun, another world, and one I could hardly bear to look at from the cool sanctuary of the valley.

"Hell to have to go out there again, isn't it?" Dave asked, as he poured coffee for me. Harry was down at the trucks getting supplies and Mike still slept inside the hut.

"You guys stay up late last night?"

"Pretty late. I don't know what time it was when Abdu finally walked out on us. He got to feeling a little better about things before the evening was over. Harry fed him several beers."

"Did Abdu make this place sound as good as it looks?"

"Perfect, Al. I couldn't have made the place any better if I'd dreamed the whole thing. I can hardly wait to look the place over in daylight."

I drank my coffee without saying anything.

"But we've got to figure out some way to get down here quicker, cut down our time on the road. I'll want to make as many trips as I can while you and Mike are still around."

"While we're around? Why? You won't have any trouble finding somebody to come down with you if you describe the place to them."

"I don't doubt that, but I'd rather not bring anybody else down. I thought we could let Uangabo be our secret--among the four of us, you know."

"I don't see how we're going to be able to do that. Everybody on the post knows where we were headed."

"Yes, of course we'll have to tell them that we got here. But I thought we might just act as though Uangabo is like any other desert village. Not much--not really worth making the difficult trip to see. If we play it down and tell how rough the trip is, maybe they'll not come--or maybe they'll give up when they hit that river. Mike and Harry agree that would be the thing to do."

I didn't say anything more; I didn't even comment on his assuming that we would want to come back. It was a hard trip, hot, exhausting, and dangerous. We weren't even home safely yet; we had the

plains to cross and the sandy riverbed to battle, heat to go through and shiftas to dodge for all we knew. But he was already planning the next trip, and I knew he was right in assuming that all of us would try to come back. I had seen very little of the village or the people but I could feel the place pulling like a magnet, even then.

Dave is right, too, I thought, in wanting to keep the others away. Everybody wants an exclusive on paradise. Old Abdu hadn't been glad to see us and Dave was planning to keep off outsiders, and I was beginning to feel the same way. I had an idea of the changes that would take place if hunting parties from the post started coming to Uangabo regularly, but I didn't think very many would make it.

We spent the morning looking over the village, strolling all the way to the pool at the foot of the waterfall, crossing there and walking down the other side. Water out of the mountains had deposited a thin layer of soil over the rock floor of the valley, thin but very fertile from all appearances. During flood time the people moved their possessions and themselves up into caves in the cliffs above the valley, coming down when the water had receded to rebuild their huts from the thick growth of savannah grass near the pool.

We were followed wherever we went by a group of villagers, chatting among themselves and now and then putting a question to Abdu, which he would translate for us and then answer. They were openly proud of their village, happy to show it to us, and pleased when we stopped to look at something or to question Abdu about it. They showed a polite curiosity about our clothes, our watches, and so forth, but for the most part they were the exhibitors, we the curious--a flat reversal of the roles we had played in Ademdeme.

We stopped at several of the huts along our way, usually at the request of one of the villagers who followed us. Many of the huts were built beside or in front of caves in the cliff, and in each cave there was fresh meat, though we saw no sign of cattle anywhere. Abdu told us that the men hunted in several of the valleys in the surrounding mountains and also traded grain for meat with some villages back in the mountains.

Steel-tipped spears and long knives hung from the walls of many of the huts, and most of the men carried short steel or bronze knives, though I didn't see any firearms in the village.

A large cooking pot sat on stones in front of every hut, warmed by the embers of the morning fire. All the pots seemed to contain the same stuff--a light brown porridge-like substance made from coarse-ground dhurra, with chunks of meat in it. Beside the pot on another stone covered by a leaf would be pieces of dhurra bread; several times we saw women baking this as we passed, molding the dough around a smooth stone the size and shape of a softball. The stones were first heated in coals, then covered with dough and set on rocks over a bed of embers and turned occasionally until the covering of bread was evenly browned.

"Abdu says they wonder why we don't eat," Mike said as we watched a woman make bread. "I guess they eat when they feel like it and wherever they are. I noticed some of them snitching food as we came along. If you want some, help yourselves."

We ate as we had seen the villagers do, dipping a piece of bread into the pot and scooping up a bite of the meat and cereal; the food was salted, something fairly rare in the desert north of

Asmara, and the stuff from the stew-pot was spicy with herbs none of us could identify.

"Good," I said to Abdu.

"No pepper," he said, shaking his head. "No hot 'nough."

"You'd rather be in Ademdem, eh? Food better there?"

He grinned, the first time since we had arrived, I think.

"Kudu there. No kudu here. We go hunt there, okay?"

I held up three fingers. "Three days," I said. "I'll be in Ademdem in three days, capito? We'll hunt kudu."

He answered rapidly in Italian, protesting that three days wasn't enough time. Did I think he had a truck? He had to walk. How could he get there in three days? Next rainy season. Okay?

I nodded to everything he said and we shook hands on it; things were right between us again and I was glad.

About noon we filled the water cans and our canteens from the stream, picked up our gear, and got ready to leave. The sun was almost directly above us and it was hot in the valley in spite of the steady breeze that had come up. Not many of the villagers were about and we guessed they were mostly inside their huts or in the cool caves. Only a few were still with us but they seemed genuinely sorry to see us go, protesting that it was too hot to cross the plains and patiently explaining that if we would wait it would get cooler. They seemed to have a very active fear of the plains that lay at the mouth of their valley. When they were finally convinced that we meant to go, though, they said no more except to wish us well and ask if we had food and water.

The natives were no more reluctant to see us go than we were

to leave. We even talked of staying until evening and trying to cross the plains at night, trying to convince ourselves that we would make up the lost time because it would be cooler and we could drive faster. We knew as we discussed it that we couldn't risk it and we finally abandoned the idea and got into the trucks and drove away, but as we left I had a strong feeling of dread, irrational but powerful. I wasn't afraid of the desert, I never have been, but I felt as though I was leaving something I might never see again, and that what I was leaving was better than anything I was going to. I put the feeling out of my mind, finally, as we made our way across the plains, but it came back to me later, many times, and sometimes I still feel it strongly, irrationally.

Dave had located Uangabo on his Air Force map as accurately as he could and later computed a compass heading from the village straight across the plains to the river. We thought the heading would be close enough to bring us out at the river, and even if we missed our crossing place by a few miles, we could easily find it once we got to the river.

We made good time across the plains, though the going was rough on both trucks, jolting and shaking them every foot of the way. We stopped after half an hour to let them cool, getting out and squatting in their shade, the rock under foot too hot to sit on. Visibility was poor; the heat warped the air around us and we drove along under a dome of fire, the mountains, the sea, the very sky cut off from our view. We were like insects crawling across the floor of hell.

I lost all sense of direction and drove by Dave's guidance; he held the compass in one hand and indicated the course with the other.

The feeling that we were driving in a circle grew on me. It became so strong that at last I stopped the jeep.

"We're going in a damn circle. Are you sure that compass is right? Walk off a ways from the jeep and try it."

"It's calibrated for the jeep, Al. It wouldn't be accurate any other place. You helped me set it. It's all right. We'll run into the river after bit. We've only been driving for an hour."

Harry and Mike pulled in beside us. Harry thought the compass was off, too, and Mike didn't know what to think.

Dave said, "We've got to follow it. We haven't any alternative. If we don't, we'll be circling out here until sundown. Look at the sun; it's right behind us, where it ought to be. Come on, let's go."

Of course he was right and so was the compass, but I could understand after I had crossed that plain how a man could walk around in circles in a snowstorm; I've never felt so lost, so detached from reason and direction and purpose as I felt that afternoon. We made a fast crossing, actually; we reached the river in less than two hours after we left Uangabo, but by the time we got there it seemed to me that night had already fallen all around us, leaving only the single dome of incredible light in which we moved. I had the illusion of travelling around and around under an inverted bowl of glaring light. I swore to myself that we had hit the same bump a thousand times, that I had wrenched the wheel to avoid the same crack in the red rock every other minute for as long as I could remember, that my life had been made up of bumping and wrenching over the same red rock, and I would go on and on, utterly lost, until the trucks broke down or we ran out of water. I knew then that the plains of Uangabo deserved

their reputation. Even now I sometimes have nightmares of that crossing; my body aches and my throat is parched, and I drink and drink without getting enough, for the water runs from the pores of my body as fast as I take it in, and seeps into my clothes which are damp but burning.

We came to the river abruptly. It loomed suddenly out of the heat haze as out of a fog, a startling wall of sun-washed green and we drove into it gratefully and leaped from the trucks and went away from them, for they seemed to radiate heat.

Mike had a plan for re-crossing the river which he explained as we lounged there in the shade.

"See those long ridges of sand?" he asked, pointing through the undergrowth to the riverbed. "They've been built up by the current, and the sand in them is dryer and is better packed than it is in other places. I noticed when we came across that we always got stuck in between the ridges or trying to climb up one. We weren't stuck once with either truck on top of one of the ridges."

He was talking about the sandspits that the recent flood had shaped in open V's across the bed of the river.

"You mean go down river a ways, then turn and sort of tack back up--zig-zag across?" Harry asked. "Won't we stick on the turns?"

"We might, but we won't have to make more than four or five tacks. What do you think, Al?"

"I guess it's all right." I had heard what they said only with difficulty and I couldn't force myself to concentrate on it; my head was pounding and there was a constant roaring in my ears. Heat exhaustion, I thought. It will go away when we get moving, get a little

air. It seemed unbearably close and stuffy under the palms; when I could no longer stand it, I went to the truck and groped in my kit for some aspirin.

"Something wrong, Al?" Dave asked.

"Got too hot, I think. Maybe not getting enough salt. I'm all right."

"Sit down and let me check you over. You been taking your atabrine?"

"Yes," I said shortly. "Leave me alone, can't you? I'll be all right when we get moving. Got a headache from the sun, that's all."

"Well, let Harry drive. You look sick to me."

Harry drove and I rode with Mike in the weapons carrier. Evidently Mike was right about the crossing; we followed his system, and made it across much more easily than we had coming out. Mike, leading the way, angled downstream on a hard-packed ridge of sand, turning to quarter upstream when he got near the point of the sandspit and running upstream on the far side of the spit until it joined another. We went like that all the way across, getting stuck only once when Mike waited too long before turning on the downstream tack.

I watched the whole thing without interest, glad that the crossing was going well but wanting nothing so badly as to be in my bed on the post.

When we got to the trees on the other side, Mike stopped to wait for Harry to come around us and take the lead in the jeep. "Why don't you crawl in back and lie down, Al," he said. "You look like hell."

I shook my head; I didn't want to move. Harry went around us

and we followed him. I had the strange feeling that I might fall out of the truck, so I held on tightly and focused my eyes on the spare tire of the jeep that bobbed and bounced in front of us. My fever mounted and the headache grew until I became nauseated with pain. Before long the spare tire of the jeep began to fade in and out of focus, to grow and then to diminish in size. I was chilling badly and my teeth chattered.

How long it was before we stopped, who fixed the bedroll in the back of the weapons carrier for me, or how I got back there, I couldn't tell you; I only know that I quit watching the spare tire of the jeep and began concentrating on one of the wooden bows that supported the canvas top of the truck. I watched it fade and grow and diminish until it finally disappeared and was replaced by a glaring light that blotted out everything else. That is all I remember of our first trip to Uungabo.

CHAPTER XIV

I was in the hospital for several days, the joy and delight of Dr. Delucca, who thought I might have one of the rarer of the twenty-seven kinds of malaria he believed he had identified in East Africa. It seemed to me to be just the regular old garden variety, but my opinion didn't count, as I was only the patient.

Delucca was keen to know all he could about the particular strain of malaria I had and where I had gotten it. He questioned me about it the first morning I felt like talking, but I wasn't much help; Dave had already told him all there was to tell.

"Probably picked it up along the large riverbed," he said to Dave that morning when he finished examining me. "From your description, the stream through the village seems a less likely source, if it flows as rapidly as you say. Not impossible, of course, but less likely. I wish I had that mosquito. Ah, how I wish I had that mosquito! You, Sergeant, you didn't notice anything different about the mosquitoes there or any other place during your trip?"

Delucca had been educated in England and he spoke pleasant, precise English with fair accuracy. Sometimes he seemed somewhat pompous, but he had a sense of humor, too.

"I didn't even know I had been bitten. I didn't notice many mosquitoes. Actually, I thought we were lucky that there weren't more. Are you sure it's malaria?"

He ignored that as not even worth an answer. "The atabrine,

you took it every day? In the prescribed amount? You didn't miss a day and not tell us, eh?"

I assured him I hadn't for the tenth time that morning.

"Take good care of him," he said to Carla, who had come into the room. "He has a special bug, very special. God, I wish I had that mosquito. If it were not so far, so hot, so many shiftas--but no, I am too old. How lucky you are, Doctor, to be young and healthy and unimpeded in any way. You will get that mosquito when you go again, eh? In a bottle you can take the little wigglers from the water. Water and all, eh?" He turned to me. "And you never missed the atabrine at all? Yes, I suppose that is possible."

Carla made a face at Delucca's back as the two doctors left.

"Get your own mosquitoes," she said when he was out of hearing.

"He's too old, too hot, and too impeded," I said. "You're early. Have you had lunch?"

"Yes. Tesfi will be up with your lunch before long. The doctor said you could sit up while I made the bed today."

I sat in the chair by the window while she made the bed. I was weak and very lightheaded. Through the window I could see Tesfi coming up the street with my lunch. The thought of eating nauseated me.

"Why don't you like Doctor Delucca?" I asked Carla.

She wrinkled her nose and smiled. "Today I don't feel like I like anybody very much."

"Not even me?"

"I have to like you; you're my patient."

"Thanks a lot," I said.

Tesfi came up the hallway and into the room carrying the tray of food. He put the tray on the bedside table and flashed me a smile.

"The world is round," I said to him. All devout Copts believe the world is flat. Or maybe they don't all believe it, but Tesfi did; it was in his Bible. I had always argued with him about it, at first heatedly and then, when I knew him better, as a joke between us.

But he broke the ritual. "Si, Signore Sargente Shannon," he said with an exaggerated bow. "If you say it, it must be so."

"Ah! That's blasphemy. That'll go in the book. You'll have to answer for that."

"What can I do? I can't argue with a sick man."

"Then you only said it to make me feel good? You don't really believe it. But it really is round, you know."

He flashed me another smile and worked the discussion toward the conclusion we had long before established between us. "Your world is round. Mine is flat."

"That's sillier yet. You mean there are two worlds?"

"There are two or more. Maybe one apiece for everybody." That was the compromise we had settled on and after four years of arguing I thought he might believe it. I wasn't sure I didn't.

He helped me back into bed and left. Carla took the cloth off the tray of food and pushed the table over to the side of the bed. There was a thin broth, some baked chicken, a baked potato, and a dish of gelatin.

"I don't want it. I can't eat it."

"The doctor said you must. I'll help you. Here, doesn't this smell good?" She pushed a spoonful of the broth at me.

"It smells like wet feathers. You eat it. Dave'll never know the difference."

"Come on, Al. Don't be mean about it. I'm supposed to feed you as much of it as I can. Eat some of it, anyway."

It meant a great deal to her so I ate what I could, but at my own pace because I wasn't sure it would stay down. She pulled a chair over and watched me without saying anything.

"Don't look so serious. I'm eating what I can. It won't be the end of your career if I don't eat it all."

"Oh!" she said with a little guilty start. "I wasn't thinking about that. And I'm supposed to be watching you!"

"You are watching me. What were you thinking about?"

"Uangabo. Al, what's it like?"

"About like any other village down that way. Seen one, you've seen 'em all." I tried to sound casual. "Didn't Dave describe the place to you?"

"He told me the same thing. But he's been excited since he came back. And he's going back there, isn't he?"

"I don't know. I suppose he is. It's an interesting trip, in a way." I concentrated on a piece of chicken and avoided looking at her.

"Interesting trip! Look at you--out of your head for two days, still so weak you can't eat. Next time it might be him."

"Thanks again for your overwhelming concern."

"Oh! I didn't mean--you're important to me, too, Al. You know that. I owe you a lot. And Harry and Mike, too. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

Suddenly she put her hands to her face and began to sob. "But it's different with him. I love him. And he'll go down to that--that damned hole and never come back. If the shiftas don't shoot him, he'll get malaria or something and die down there."

"Carla--"

"Or he'll just stay there. He'll live there and never come back. Won't he? It's true, that's what he wants to do, isn't it?"

She took her hands away from her tear-streaked face and looked at me as though she expected me to deny it. I'd seen that look before; I remembered most clearly seeing it on the face of a man I was working on with a four-by-four bandage and a package of sulfa powder, wasting my time because the best surgeon in the world couldn't have stretched his time out for another quarter of an hour. "I'm gonna die, ain't I?" he'd asked, knowing it but wanting me to say that it wasn't so. I didn't answer him, and he went on and died.

I didn't answer Carla, either, and the expectancy went out of her face, finally. She blotted her cheeks with a handkerchief, tucked it away in her pocket, and came around the bed to take the tray of dishes from the table.

"Look, Carla," I said. "You've got some money. Why don't you take it and go to Italy--or even the States? Get out of here and get Dave off your mind."

I could see she had considered it. "I can't. I love him, Al. I can't run away from him."

"Then if I were you, I'd make up my mind to set up housekeeping in Uangabo. Or if not there, someplace like it."

She obviously hadn't considered that, not for a moment. She

sniffed disdainfully, put the cloth over the tray and picked it up. At the door she stopped. "Will you do something for me, Al? You've done a lot; do this one thing more. Try to talk Dave out of going to Uangabo. It's nothing to you, and it's all the world to me."

She waited in the doorway for an answer. "There are as many worlds as there people to live in them," I said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that going to Uangabo may be all the world to Dave. All his world. It isn't my business to talk him out of anything--not that I could if I tried. Anyway, he hasn't said he was going there--not permanently. At least, he hasn't said it to me."

She shook her head impatiently, her incredible black hair flowing across her shoulders, and said as though she were explaining something to a child, "You don't understand. Uangabo is nothing to Dave. He may think so now, but going there would be a mistake for him. A terrible mistake. I know it. Haven't I lived in this country all my life? And in the best parts of it, not the worst, like Uangabo. He belongs in his own country, in a clean American city, with an office and a home and a car. You have to help keep him from making a mistake. Do it for Dave, if you won't do it for me."

She fixed me with a gaze of such intensity that I picked at the covers of the bed with my fingers and looked away from her and out the window. "I'll try to talk him out of it," I promised, "if he really plans on living there. He hasn't said he planned on it, not to me."

After she left I slept for an hour or so, read a little, and late in the afternoon, I had a rather unlikely visitor, Truskowski. He stood uncertainly in the doorway.

"Hi, Truss. Come on in."

"I heard you were under the weather. Thought I'd drop by and see how you were feeling." He glanced up and down the hallway and then came into the room. "Here, I brought you something." He fished a small paper bag out of a baggy fatigue pocket and took a coke bottle out of the bag. The bottle was tightly stopped with a cork and filled with a clear liquid, slightly pink when he held it up to the light.

"White lightning," he said proudly. "Me and old Bill Brooks run her off on one of them navy salt-water stills. Stilled her out of that vin-o rose-o the Ities drinks. That's how come it's a little pink. Don't spoil the taste a bit."

"Say, thanks, Truss. Looks plenty potent. Sit down." I waved him into the chair by the window and slipped the bottle into a drawer in the bedside table. "I'll just put this out of sight. No use making the doc nervous."

He fidgeted in the chair for a moment, uncertain how to begin what he had come to say. "Al, how well do you know Kettar? He got anything against you?"

"Nothing personal. Not any more than he's got against most of the guys on this post. I've got nothing special against him, either, except he's a bastard who likes to stir up trouble."

"A rat bastard," Truss agreed. "Well, what he done, he got on the point-to-point circuit we got to the British Administration Office in Massawa, which we ain't even supposed to use except for emergencies, and he asked the DO down there if you guys had clearance to hunt at Uangabo last week."

"The dirty son of a bitch. What did the DO say?"

"I only heard the transmission. I wasn't at a receiver at the time so I couldn't get the DO's end of the conversation. But as near as I could tell, the DO said he'd check his records and let Kettar know."

Truss got up, stretched, and said, "Well, I've got to get down to the mess hall. I'd of tipped Mike but I didn't get a chance at the station, and I didn't know if I'd see him tonight or not. What you guys better do, you better get ahold of that DO and see if you can chill the beef down there. What I heard sounded like Kettar was gettin' the old run-around from him."

"Thanks, Truss. I can't do anything from here, but I'll see Mike tonight. And thanks again for the juice."

"It's nothin'. Don't drink that stuff straight, though. That's the run-off from about half a gallon of wine. You figure that stuff at maybe ten percent, and it makes what's in that coke bottle damn near pure alcohol. If I hear anything more, I'll let you know."

"Don't get caught, Truss. Kettar will bust you sure as hell."

"Forget it."

Dave, Mike, Harry, and I talked over what Truskowski had told me when the three of them came to see me that evening. I thought Mike would know about Kettar's call to Massawa--very little went on at the station that he didn't know--but Kettar had kept him in the code room all afternoon taking inventory of classified documents. We decided that the first thing we should do was talk to Woodruff, and Mike left to see if he could get through to Massawa, vowing that if he couldn't get in touch with Woodruff any other way, he'd go to the station and use the point-to-point emergency link that Kettar had used.

"Well," Harry said when Mike had gone, "I guess we've made our last trip to Uangabo. Even if Mike gets the DO to cover for us this time, Kettar will make sure we don't go again."

We had made a punch of the liquor Truss brought me and some fruit juice, and Dave had allowed me one drink. I sipped it and said, "Kettar can't stop us if we really want to go. There isn't any way he can keep us confined to the post all the time, and there are several roads out of this town that don't go through the British roadblocks."

"He could get the British to stop up in Massawa, though," Dave said. "It would be just about impossible to take two trucks through Massawa without their knowing it."

I said, "We wouldn't have to go through Massawa. We could run the Massawa road at night, leave it this side of Massawa, circle the town on the west, and pick up the track to Uangabo several miles south of Massawa. Why, we could leave here at sundown and be at the river by dawn."

"We'd be crazy to try a thing like that," Harry said.

But Dave was thinking hard about what I'd said. "I think you're right, Al. Really, nobody cares much where we go except Kettar, and he'd never be able to prove where we'd been. The British wouldn't like it, of course, but I don't think they'd do anything about it, even if they found out."

"You're both crazy," Harry said. He was pacing the floor, making gestures with both hands. "Suppose the shiftas shot up a truck? Or one of us? Or we had a breakdown and had to leave one of the trucks down there? Wildest thing I ever heard."

"There would be some significant risks," Dave said.

"Significant risks!" Harry waved a hand wildly. "The odds are terrible. Don't count on me to go with you."

"Amazing," Dave said.

Harry stopped pacing. "What's amazing?"

"Your ability at self-deception. Why, you know as well as I do that you'd jump at the chance to run a roadblock at midnight and slip down the Massawa road. You can't help yourself; if you could, you'd be back in the States running a bank or something instead of over here. Adventure is in your blood, Harry. Face it and quite pacing the floor."

Harry grinned and sat down. Dave had sold him; suddenly he was the dashing young adventurer, ready to fly in the face of the devil. The idea made him a little uncomfortable, but he liked it.

"Anyway," Dave went on, "it won't be necessary to sneak out of town at all. Delucca's working right now through the British Medical service to get permission for me to take a party there, and he's also arranging to provide medical coverage for the post while I'm away."

Harry looked a little disappointed; it began to look as though he would have to put off being an intrepid adventurer.

"Where does Delucca get all his influence?" he wanted to know.

"Well, for one thing, he's an expert in the diseases of this area and the British need him; for another, he's gone out of his way to cooperate with them from the beginning of the occupation; and for a third, he's got a United Nations grant to continue his studies of malaria. He's a good man to know."

Mike came in grinning. "I talked to Woodruff. He says there's a written application for clearance to travel to Uangabo on file down

there, made out by you and signed by him, dated three months ago. You might have saved me a phone call, Dave."

Dave grinned too. "I didn't know whether it had reached there yet. I didn't send it until the day after we got back."

"Yeah, I guess that much. It must just have reached Massawa--otherwise Woodruff would have told Kettar about it this afternoon. He's sending Kettar a note about it, anyway."

From that evening we began to plan to return to Uangabo. Dave was the moving force behind the planning. He told us frankly that he had decided to take a discharge from the army when his time expired and live in Uangabo at least temporarily and perhaps permanently. He naturally wanted to learn as much about the village as he could and to form a relationship with the people that would allow him to move in comfortably with them.

But the rest of us planned enthusiastically, too. We would have gone in order to help Dave, of course, but that wasn't the only reason; we really wanted to go, and if you ask me why, I can't tell you. The challenge of just getting to the place was sufficient reason for the first trip, I suppose, but we had proved that we could make the trip--why should we go back? In addition to the obvious danger involved, the trip was the kind of hot, hard work that nobody could have hired me to do.

All I can tell you is that there was a fascination about Uangabo that defies explanation. There was its location, of course, remote, inaccessible, mysterious. But there was more than that--there was something about the people. . . . Have you ever watched a really good baseball player carefully while he plays? Whether he's on his way up

or at the top or on his way down, whether he's making pots of money or just scraping by, if he's a real pro, you can tell by watching him that he's doing exactly what he wants to do and that he would be doing it as often as he could if he didn't get a dime for it.

The people at Uangabo were that way--real pros at living. And I wanted to see more of them.

Whatever it was that called us back, it was strong and urgent, and all of us felt it. We planned two trips; we would make the first, a three-day trip, perhaps in two or three weeks if I was up to it. The second trip would be longer--a week or ten days if we could manage it--sometime before Mike and I got shipped back to the States.

I had a type of malaria, according to Doctor Delucca, that was acute but of short duration, and it is true that I recovered rapidly, though I think that the stimulation of planning another trip to Uangabo helped. By the end of the week I felt well enough to go back to duty, but Dave thought I ought to take it easy for a few more days, so I worked around the dispensary and the lab when I felt like it and lay and read the rest of the time. The idleness didn't seem to make me restless as it had before; I had something to look forward to.

Carla came into the lab one afternoon when I was packing some collection bottles to be used on the trip to Uangabo. I was pasting blank labels on the bottles, numbering them, and putting them in order in the divided wooden cartons the post utility shop had made for Dave. She watched for a moment, then asked, "What are those?"

"Specimen bottles--for water samples. Stuff like that."

"You're getting them ready to take to Uangabo, aren't you?"

I didn't deny it. Then she said, "You promised to try to talk

Dave out of going."

I remembered guiltily that I had. "We're only going for three days."

"Yes, this time," she said, "and a week next time, and after that how long?"

I didn't answer.

"He doesn't belong there," she said.

"Who are you to say where he belongs?" I flared. "You think you know better than he does what's best for him?"

"Yes," she said in the matter-of-fact voice she would have used to give somebody a street address or a phone number, deliberately and without heat. "Yes, I do. Because I love him, Al, and when you love somebody, you know what's right for them. Didn't you ever love anybody, Al?"

"Never," I lied.

"Well, if you had, you'd know what I mean," she said confidently.

"I doubt it. Anyway, he may not love you."

"He loves me. If he didn't, I wouldn't be here, would I?"

I finished packing the box of bottles I was working on and began on another. She got a box of slides from a drawer in the slide file and started out with them. She stopped by the door and turned toward me, and when I looked up from the box I was packing, she said, "I'll make him a good wife, Al. Already I speak as well as any wife on the post. I read American magazines and go to American movies. I listen in the dispensary to every word and learn it and how it sounds."

"Carla . . ."

"And I read the journals he gets, every one of them. Al, I

know what the inside of an American doctor's office looks like as well as I know my own bedroom. I know what equipment we'll need and how much it costs, and I have the money to buy most of it for him. For us. No doctor ever had a better wife."

The outside door of the hospital opened and banged shut and Dave's quick, firm tread sounded in the corridor.

I said, "You've got a good case but you're presenting it to the wrong man. Here comes Dave now."

She looked at me in cold fury as Dave strode through the door.

"Did you find the slides, Carla?" he asked. "What's been keeping you?"

"I found them. Al and I have been talking."

"Oh--private conversation, or can I stay?"

She didn't say anything.

"You wouldn't be interested," I said. "Carla was telling me the plot of a movie. There's this boy, see, and this girl, and they're in love but they have this quarrel about where they're going to live. Well, what finally happens . . ."

"Spare me," he said, and just in time, too, for I hadn't the slightest idea where my story was going to end. "I think I've seen the picture. Anyway I know the plot. Once, just once, I'd like to see a movie where the characters act like real people--where they say to each other 'Well, looks like we can't get together so there's no use hanging around making each other miserable,' and go their separate ways. That would be my idea of a happy ending."

Carla tossed her head angrily, picked up the slides, and flounced out.

Dave looked after her and said, "Now what did I say? She's so touchy lately that I'm afraid to say anything to her. What do you suppose she's mad about?"

"You were knocking her favorite fantasy."

"Movies?"

"No. Marriage."

He frowned in annoyance. "I suppose she asked you to try to talk me out of going to Uangabo?"

"How did you know?" I asked in surprise.

"It wasn't hard to guess. She's been after Harry, too."

He fingered the boxes of bottles I was packing, shook one to see if it rattled, and said reflectively, "You were probably right in the first place, Al. It was a mistake to let her come here at all."

I didn't reply. He went on, "She's always had the illusion that I would marry her some day. Maybe part of it is my fault; I suppose I encouraged it in the beginning, without realizing what I was doing. And then when I did become aware of how she felt and what she was planning, I couldn't disillusion her, not all at once. I thought it would be easier on her to be around while I made my own plans, to wake up a little at a time."

He smiled ruefully. "It hasn't worked that way, has it?"

I said, "Apparently not. She was telling me this morning about how she was going to furnish your office in the States."

"Well," he said with finality, "she'll have to face the truth sooner or later. If Uangabo looks as attractive to me the next time we visit it as it did the last time, I'm going to make definite plans to live there. That's all there is to it." He paused, and then went

on, "You don't have to go with me down there if you don't want to, Al."

I said, "Why shouldn't I want to go? I don't expect to get malaria every time I leave Asmara."

"I didn't mean that. I meant that you might--well, think I'm doing wrong. Being unfair to Carla. I'm going anyway, but I thought you might not feel that I was doing the right thing. And if you don't want to go with me, I'll understand."

"I'll go. If you're going anyway, what difference does it make? I'm not sure I'd try to talk you out of it if I could. When do you intend to go?"

"I'm on my way up to headquarters now to meet with Woodruff. The UN commission has asked him to allow us to undertake some medical reasearch for them in the Uangabo area. All I have to do is convince him that it's safe."

"You shouldn't have any trouble doing that," I said, remembering how he had handled Harry.

"No, I don't think I will. I hope not. With you and Mike leaving and the UN commission just about decided to turn this country over to Ethiopia, I haven't much time left. I want to be all set up at Uangabo as soon as I can be."

He went to keep his appointment with Woodruff and I went across to the dispensary. Tesfi was running the place alone; Carla was not feeling well, he told me. She had taken the rest of the afternoon off. I was relieved to find her gone. Disillusionment, Dave had once said, was the ugliest thing that happens to people.

CHAPTER XV

Dave easily convinced Woodruff that it was safe for us to go to Uangabo, as we had anticipated, and we planned a trip for the first weekend of the following month, barely two weeks away. At first the trip was set for Friday morning to Sunday evening, but with a little pressure on Kettar through Major Wilson, Mike got leave to stay away until Monday evening, and we stretched the time some more by arranging to leave Thursday evening and go down the mountain with an armed patrol during the night. Dave also talked Nick Costa into going with us to act as an interpreter.

The trip went well from the first. We left Asmara at dusk, the noise of our trucks and the four trucks of the British patrol echoing strangely in the night stillness of the mountains. The British stopped every fifty minutes to cool their trucks and take a break. We gathered in little groups at these stops and talked in voices pitched naturally low in the moon-shade of the immense mountains. Brown metal and black mountains absorbed the light of our cigarettes and gave back scarcely a reflection. Lower down the mountain, water chuckled and murmured in the ditches, the remaining run-off of the rainy season in the mountains, seeping out of the sides of the mountains in thousands of springs, like blood seeping out of the hide of a wounded giant.

The air was chill and filled with the scent of things growing; I could smell the blossoms of the prickly pear cactus and sometimes the heavy scent of papaya, and cigarette smoke, of course, pungent in the

cool air, and the rank stink of hot metal from the trucks, and over it all the wild, sweet, heavy scent of green growing things.

I was supposed to be sleeping on a bed-roll in the back of the weapons carrier but I couldn't stay there when we stopped. I had to get out and stretch and talk to Mike and Nick Costa and the four Limeys in the Bedford behind us.

One of the Limeys was a Welshman they called Taffy. He had been with a night patrol that was badly shot up two weeks before down on the Adi Ugari stretch of the Asmara-Addis Ababa road, and he was very nervous and jumpy. He kept shushing us and capping his hand around his ear, listening for shiftas, and threatening to fire at the bandits he imagined he heard in the mountains around us. The others were ashamed of him and the corporal in charge of the section kept threatening him with "two bloody weeks of bloody pack-drill and a month's confinement to barrack," and confiding to Mike and me that "Old Taff has bloody had it, with three patrols hand-running that got it in the dark from the Shiftys." Taffy had been creased across the throat by a bullet in the clash near Adi Ugari and had been passed over when the shiftas came out to finish off the wounded because his throat was bloody and they assumed it had already been cut.

"Why didn't you leave him back at Asmara?" Mike asked during one break. "Surely you aren't that shorthanded."

"I would have if I'd guessed he'd carry on so. But he makes the tea, you understand, so I brought him on. Only man in the section who can make a decent cup of tea on an open fire."

I thought Taffy and the corporal were putting on a show for us, but I wasn't sure; Taffy did have an ugly scar across his throat.

Even though the patrol moved slowly, we were in Massawa by dawn, across the river before noon, and on the edge of the Uangabo plain when we stopped for lunch. The plain seemed even hotter and drier than it had been before but we made short work of the crossing, following the compass course Dave had plotted on the map and coming out no more than half a mile east of the valley. The trip was so routine and easy that it made all our detailed planning seem ridiculous but we knew the danger was there, lurking, waiting for us to do something careless or stupid, or to have a run of bad luck.

Our timing was great. A night hunting party from Uangabo had just returned to the valley carrying one of their number on an improvised litter. The man had been badly mauled and chewed by a leopard. Dave, using Costa to interpret for him, got the fellow's consent to go to work on the wounds, though it was clear that the man himself had little hope of living. Dave cleaned the scratches, disinfected them, and closed the worst of them, including a bone-deep scalp wound, with sutures.

The stitching job impressed everybody, even the victim; he told Costa confidentially that he still expected to die, but he seemed to enjoy himself as the center of things anyway. Leopards, he explained to Costa, carried poison in their claws. Dave told the man that he had given him something to kill the poison and the man nodded sadly and said that they used things to kill the poison, too, but that usually the hunters died anyway when they had been scratched by a leopard; the thought made the fellow gloomy again and nothing Costa could say would cheer him. After explaining what he was doing, Dave gave the hunter something to ease his pain and make him sleep, and we left.

We were escorted to the same hut we had occupied before, and while there was less excitement about our coming than there had been the first time, we still drew a following and we met with the same polite courtesy we had enjoyed on the first trip, perhaps a little warmer and less formal this time.

We made a fire and a hot meal and stuffed ourselves, for we hadn't eaten much all day; afterward we sat around drinking beer and talking to some of the men from the village who stayed around as they had done before.

We found out that Abdu was gone--Costa couldn't tell where and we finally concluded that in Uangabo you were either there or you were not, and as far as they were concerned, if you were not in Uangabo, then it didn't matter much where you were.

But we discovered that we hadn't seen all of Uangabo. It was not a single village, but a complex of no less than four villages, the other three of which were situated within a day's walk in valleys similar to the one we were in. Dave could scarcely contain his excitement; he wanted to set off the first thing in the morning to see the other villages but decided after some discussion that he would stay with me, for of course I was still not in shape to make a trip by foot over the steep mountains that surrounded the vally. Besides, there was the wounded hunter to see to, and Dave felt that we could find plenty to do where we were.

Mike and Harry, though, left with two guides the following morning. We kept Costa with us, but Mike thought he could make himself understood well enough with signs and the few words he had been able to pick up from Costa and from the natives.

The wounded hunter felt much better that morning. We got him to sit up and eat and even to stand and take a few steps. I wondered what he was going to do when it was time for the stitches to come out, but Dave worked with him through Costa until we thought we had taught him enough so that he would be able to take them out himself where he could reach them, and to show somebody else how to get the ones he couldn't reach. The hardest part was trying to explain to him when they were to come out, but Costa finally solved that problem, we hoped, by giving him the right number of rocks, one rock for each day, and telling him to throw a rock into the stream every morning; on the day that he threw away the last rock, the stitches were to come out.

Finally Dave thought the fellow had it. "If he hasn't, they'll be absorbed under the skin and the rest will drop off eventually," Dave said, so we left it that way.

The villagers were more impressed by Dave than they had been the night before, and they began coming to him with ailments of one kind and another. By noon Saturday he was doing a good business in everything from infected minor wounds to hookworm infestation. The things that interested him most were the comparatively high incidence of endemic goiter and the very frequent symptoms of mild malarial infection.

I helped him a little throughout the day, but mostly I just sat and took notes, for he wanted a record of everything he saw and treated. Even doing that tired me and I was glad when the afternoon drew on and no more patients came.

Mike and Harry had taken bedrolls and planned to stay overnight if they found a place interesting enough to warrant it, and we assumed they had, for they didn't return that evening. Dave and Nick Costa

sat late by the fire in front of the hut talking to some of the villagers but even the mild activities of the day had tired me so that I went to my bedroll shortly after dark.

I slept dreamlessly and deeply and woke when dawn was no more than a tentative grayness in the east and a suggestion of light on the west wall of the canyon. Nothing was stirring in the village, no light, and no sound except the subdued murmur of the little stream. I lit a cigarette; the lighter glared like a flare in the darkness and the rasp of the ignition wheel on the flint was harsh and unnaturally loud. I might have been the only man in the world for all I could tell as I stood before the hut that morning. It was a strange feeling to me and I smoked the cigarette and toyed with the idea and liked it.

Then a baby wailed thinly from a hut on the other side of the stream and I started guiltily, as though I had awakened it and listened intently for the accusing voice of its mother, but it gave another short cry which ended in a satisfied gurgle, and the silence set in again.

The light was bolder and more definite by the time I finished the cigarette. I was able to see the ash-pit from last night's fire so I went to it and blew on the ashes to see if there were any coals. There were none so I started a small fire from the cigarette butt, lighting some twisted grass from it and then blowing and fanning the grass until I had enough flame to start some twigs to burning, and finally adding a few sticks to the twigs.

I could have done it in a fraction of the time with my lighter and a cup of gasoline, but I wasn't in any hurry. After the fire was

built, I stood near it and watched it, not knowing exactly why I had built it.

By that time the light was strong enough so that I could see across the stream. Sounds followed the light, low and few at first, then more as the villagers came alive with the day and began the routine of living. Fires sprang up along the canyon walls on both sides, and I was oddly proud to have been the first one up. I threw a few large sticks on the fire and went to the stream for water.

Dave was standing by the fire when I returned, rubbing his heavily stubbled jaw and smiling into the morning sky.

"You didn't sleep long," I said.

"Long enough. A little sleep goes a long way here, I think. Mike and Harry will be back this morning, and if we're going to collect any samples and specimens at the big river, we'd better leave here by noon. That means we've got a lot to do this morning. I want samples of the water here all the way from the waterfall down into the desert at intervals of about five hundred feet."

So we made coffee, roused Costa out, and breakfasted on the coffee and some hard rolls. Then we spent the morning gathering the samples of water and of food from cooking pots throughout the village. We also visited the man with the leopard wounds and found him doing very well.

Mike and Harry arrived in the middle of the morning full of enthusiastic reports of the villages they had visited. They had gone to two villages and learned of a third, though they hadn't seen it. The two they had seen, they told us, were somewhat smaller than the one we were in; they sat in valleys which could be reached only by foot

through the mountains.

"It's a good thing you didn't try to go with us, Al," Harry said. "It's a rough trip."

"How far?" Dave wanted to know.

"About four hours to the first valley."

"Actually," Mike said, "about four hours from here to either of the two we visited; they're both about the same distance. The trail forks as soon as you get to the top of the canyon there." He pointed toward the waterfall.

"How far to the other village--the one you didn't get to?"

Dave asked.

"No way of telling, Dave. I can't figure out how they compute distance--if they do."

"It can't be too far," Harry said, "because one of the men with us left to go to the third village yesterday afternoon and this morning he was in the second valley before we left there. He could have walked part of the way at night, I suppose, but if he didn't, then he made it from village number one over to number two and then back to number three in eight, maybe ten, hours."

"You're making my head spin," I said. "Village number one, number two--don't they have names?"

Mike hadn't been able to tell so we used Costa to question some of the men who had been with Mike and Harry, but the results were inconclusive; Costa thought the villages in the other valleys had names but he couldn't assign a specific name to any one of them, and he couldn't gain any idea about the distance between villages except for a general impression that you could go to any one of them and back in

the same day.

We gave up the questioning, finally, and packed our gear in the trucks for the trip back to Asmara. We had the rest of that day and all of the following day to make the trip, but we wanted enough time at the big river to explore it and to take the samples we needed.

There was still quite a bit of ice left in the big ice chest in the back of the weapons carrier, plenty of meat, and most of the beer we had brought. We were out of bread but we made a passable cold lunch of salami and some crackers and washed it down with beer.

While we ate, Mike talked constantly about the back-villages, as he called them; I had never seen him so talkative and so enthusiastic about anything before.

"It's all one community, really," he said. "This village is apparently the only one which raises grain. In the other two they graze goats---there's good pasture in both valleys---and I saw some banana trees in one of them. I suppose most of their meat comes from the goat herds. They must trade with this village or maybe they hold everything in common; anyway, the food in the other villages is the same as it is here."

By the time we had finished eating, I was sorry I hadn't gone with them over the mountains. Dave was wishing he had gone, too.

"We'll be back," he said. "We'll stay a week--ten days, maybe. Spend a day at each of the other villages." He said it quietly but with great conviction, and nobody contradicted him.

Mike and Dave led the way across the hot plain in the jeep, very directly this time, with confidence in the compass. Costa drove the weapons carrier. We went so rapidly across the rough lava rock that

I was uncomfortable lying on the bedroll, so I rolled it and put it on a wheel-well and sat on it. Seeing me there, Harry climbed over the back of the front seat and sat with me.

"I guess old Dave's really going to move down here," he said.

I nodded; it seemed too dry and hot to talk, and I had my mind on Uangabo and didn't feel like making small talk anyway.

"It's awfully remote, though," he went on. "I wish he'd think about moving to Massawa and setting up a practice there instead. He could go out to Uangabo a couple of times a month. He could make it pay in Massawa, too. If I get a business started over here, that's where I'll have my offices."

He stared at me expectantly, so I said, "It gets too hot there. Stays hot most of the year."

He brushed aside that objection with a wave of his hand. "Air-conditioning. Easiest thing in the world--you ever been in Aramco headquarters in Dhahran? And he could get him a couple of Land Rovers, put sand tires on them. Why, he could make enough in Massawa to do just about anything he wanted to do in Uangabo. There's always money to be made around a port. And if Ethiopia gets this country under the UN settlement--which they're sure to do--Massawa will be a busy place. It's the only seaport available to Ethiopia; there's bound to be a lot of traffic through there. If Dave's going to stay over here, Massawa's the place for him."

I didn't say anything. He got off the wheel-well and began rummaging in the ice chest for a canteen of water.

"The thing is," he said between gulps of water, "Uangabo is great in some ways but there's nothing much to be done with the place."

They grow just enough food for their own use, as far as I could see, with none left over to trade. Nick said they used to do some business in leopard hides and python skins, but a couple of loads of skins a year isn't going to get them much--matches and salt, maybe. When you think about it, they don't really have anything you could turn into cash or trade for stuff from the outside."

"There may be diamonds or gold or something in the hills around there," I said. "While you're up, get me a beer off the ice, will you? Get one for Nick, too."

He got the beers, his mind on the gold and diamonds. "Too risky," he decided. "There might be mineral deposits worth working, but they'd have to be high grade because getting them out would be expensive. No, Uangabo's not right for Dave. Massawa's the place, if he's serious about staying over here; don't you think so?"

"No."

"No! Why not? You've got to be realistic, Al. Sure, it sounds great to Dave right now, living out here, helping the natives, bringing them all the advantages of modern science and all that, but in the long run it doesn't make sense. If he stuck it out, which I don't think anybody could do for very long, he still wouldn't be able to do anything worth while in Uangabo. Five years would go by, ten, and he'd be in exactly the same place as he was when he started. He wouldn't have changed a thing--why he'd be living like they do!"

"You don't understand, Harry. That's exactly what he wants to do."

"What do you mean--live like a native? I don't believe it."

"Maybe not live like a native, especially, but avoid living

like he has been and like he'd have to do in Massawa. After all, what's the difference between Massawa and Jersey City? If you spend your time going from an air-conditioned house to an air-conditioned office in an air-conditioned car, it doesn't make much difference where you live. Dave wants to get away from just the things you want to bring into the country. He doesn't want to change Uangabo; at least, not in the way you'd want to."

"What's the matter with the way I'd want to change it?"

"There's nothing wrong with it, Harry. It just isn't for Dave. All he wants is a place where he can trade a little medical skill for a life minus most of what you and I would call the modern conveniences. He's a hell of a lot less interested in what he can do for Uangabo than in what it can do for him."

Harry thought about that for a minute, trying to see the thing as I had put it. "You make him sound awfully selfish."

I shrugged. "Who isn't? What he wants is different from what you want--that doesn't mean he's any purer in heart, does it? He'll try just as hard to make a home for himself at Uangabo as you'll try to buy leopard hides for half what you can sell them for, if you get a chance. You want a buck; he wants to be left alone. What's the difference?"

The beer can was empty. I looked out the back of the truck at the hot, red, empty plain and thought of the beer can lying there in the sun, for years, maybe. Probably for decades; it wouldn't rust in that climate. Maybe someone would eventually find it--a shifta who would take it with him and make a spear-head of it, or some Limey who would pick it up and say, "Bloody Yanks, what do they do, drop them

from airplanes?"

I tossed the can onto the floor of the truck back by the tailgate. Harry got up automatically and pitched it over the tailgate. "Well, if he does come down here, all I can say is that it's a hell of a thing to do to Carla," he said, and crawled back into the cab with Costa.

Dave gave us little time to rest in the shade of the palms by the river, for he was eager to learn as much as he could about it. He and Mike went up-river, while the three of us in the weapons carrier went down toward the sea, stopping every few hundred yards to go through the palm growth, scan the riverbed for waterholes, take samples from those we found, and sketch in recognizable terrain features on the maps Dave had prepared in Asmara.

When we reached the sea, we pulled out on the plain again and went up-river to join Dave and Mike, who had much more ground to cover than we had and who were going more slowly because the palm growth was thicker up the river than it was toward the sea. The water holes were also more abundant, and there was a great deal of game sign, mostly boar and dik-dik, so that Harry loaded his rifle and carried it unslung when we approached the riverbed through the heavy brush, thinking we might jump a boar.

The brush was so heavy, finally, that we gave up before we got to the mountains. The banks of the river were steep, too, and getting to the waterholes became increasingly difficult. The water frequently lay in pockets back under massive rocks that were covered with tangles of vines. The run-off had been turbulent up there, leaving the sand of the riverbed piled in long ridges, high as a man's head; there was

no possibility of making a crossing with the trucks up there.

About four in the afternoon we went down river again and crossed at our regular crossing place, not having found a better one. We spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the north bank of the river; I couldn't see much sense in that because one side of the river seemed like the other to me, but Dave insisted on it so we did. Harry and Mike wanted to hunt and they finally did get some running shots at a very large and fierce looking boar that we jumped from his mid-day resting place, a cool, shallow hole under a large rock. They both missed with the hasty snap-shots they got off when we jumped him, and he was soon out of sight in the thicket. Dave talked them out of trying to track him by convincing them that they would have a better chance of getting game in the palm fringe the next morning if they didn't stir the place up too much that evening.

An hour before sundown we piled brush and several large logs on the weapons carrier and pulled north for several miles, finally making camp on a prominent knoll between two wadis. While we were making camp Costa saw a large herd of gazelle not more than three hundred yards away, and Mike, Harry, and I stalked them, keeping well down in a wadi for concealment.

We got within fifty yards of them without startling them. I know they saw us, but they evidently had never been shot at and watched us warily but without bolting while we held a whispered conference, picked our animals, sighted in on them, and squeezed off our shots. It was easy shooting and all three of us scored on the first shot.

As the herd bolted, a big buck which we hadn't seen cut across in front of us, between us and the rest of the herd. Harry jacked a

round into the chamber of the little 250/3000 Savage, threw it to his shoulder, followed the buck for a moment, and fired. It was a perfect shot, catching the gazelle high in the front quarters while the animal was at the top of its stride, killing it cleanly in mid-air so that it folded and tumbled to the ground like a wing-shot pheasant. It was a hunter's kill and Harry was instantly proud of it.

"Beautiful!" Mike said. "God! That was perfect, Harry. I wish I had a picture of it."

"It's a good rifle," Harry said. "But he wasn't very far off."

"The hell he wasn't. He just looked close because he's so much bigger than the others. Hell, that's a real trophy gazelle, Harry. I can tell from here that he's bigger than I've ever seen before."

We got out of the wadi and waved for Nick to bring the truck. When he started with the truck, we walked out to where the gazelle lay, looking at the three we had killed together first, then going over to examine the big one Harry had shot.

I looked at the gazelle lying there, the biggest I had ever seen, and said, "He's a beauty, Harry. A real beauty. I'll bet he's a record for Thompson gazelle."

Mike started to say something, then stopped and looked queerly at Harry, who didn't say anything either, but took hold of the long, graceful horn, lifted the animal's head, and twisted it to expose the other horn--or rather to expose the place where the other horn had been, for it was broken off a few inches from the butt.

"Dammit," Harry said very softly, dropping the head.

Mike looked around on the ground. "They can stick it back on when they mount the head. Come on, let's find it. It's right around

here somewhere. He broke it when he fell."

"He did like hell! Look at it, will you? Just look at it! It's been broken off weeks ago. Probably during the rutting season."

I examined the stump of the horn and even in the fading light I could see that Harry was right, the break was an old one, and the end of the stump was weathered and smooth.

Costa came up with the truck, looked at the big buck lying there, and said something to Mike excitedly in Italian. Mike replied in Italian, Costa lifted the buck's head, grunted, and said nothing more. He and I hung the gazelle on the side of the truck and cut his throat, and then got the others and did the same.

Harry was silent and moody as we ate, but Mike finally drew him out a little by proposing that we ambush some hyenas, using the gazelle guts as bait. We drove the weapons carrier down the knoll forty yards or so, gutted the gazelle, left the offal there, and aimed the jeep lights in that direction.

When we could tell by the noise of the snapping and chuckling that we had drawn a crowd, Dave switched on the jeep lights and the other four of us fired at the startled hyenas. They were so incredibly fast that we killed none of them cleanly and the wounded ran yelping off into the darkness. Harry and Mike drove down the slope in the jeep. The bait was all gone. There was plenty of blood around, but no hyenas. Harry thought that he had seen a wounded hyena run into the wadi at the foot of the slope so he took a flashlight and examined the wadi on foot. The wadi was about six feet deep at that point, with almost vertical dirt banks, and Harry slid down the bank and threw the beam of the light into a tight little growth of thorn bushes that hug-

ged the bank.

The beam startled a hyena which had taken refuge in the thicket, so that it bolted wildly from the cover into the light, knocking Harry off his feet. His rifle went off as he fell, the waspy little .25 caliber slug glancing off a rock on the other side of the wadi and singing out into the empty sky, and Mike, watching from the top of the bank, roared with laughter.

Mike was still laughing when he told the rest of us about it, but though Harry tried his best to see the humor in the thing, he simply couldn't do it.

"The hell with it," he said. "Come on, Nick, give me a hand, will you?"

When Nick saw that Harry intended to use the carcass of the big buck for hyena bait, he protested. So did the rest of us, but Harry paid no attention to us.

"It's no good for anything," he said, kicking the carcass.

"The trophy-size, one-horned son of a bitch. He's too old and tough to eat. Come on, help me stake him out."

"He'll make good sausage," Mike said. "Costa's wife can make sausage out of the toughest gazelle you ever saw."

"He'll make hyena bait," Harry said, unhooking the carcass from the truck and trying to drag it off down the slope. "If I can't do anything else right, I'll bet you one thing--I'm going to nail some hyenas, and I'm going to do it tonight."

Dave hadn't said anything, but when none of the rest of us moved to help Harry, Dave pitched the dregs of his coffee on the ground and helped drag the gazelle down the slope and stake it down.

The fire had burned low; when Harry came back, he threw water on the logs that were still flaming and we sat talking and drinking beer, watching the embers that still glowed faintly. Harry was in a better mood while we waited for the scavengers to gather, and he joined in the talk and seemed content. We heard the hyenas laughing their grisly laugh in the distance--the wadi Harry had stumbled in seemed to be full of them--but none came near the bait for a long time. I thought they probably wouldn't come back after being shot at once, but I didn't mind the wait; I wasn't sleepy at all, and I think I would have been content to sit by the dead fire all night. There was a moon, not full but bright enough so that as my eyes became accustomed to the darkness I could make out the outlines of the vehicles and then the dark shadow of the wadi down the slope, and finally the little blob of the bait.

Our talk was the inconsequential talk of contented men. Mike told how he had come to Eritrea early in the war, coming in by way of North Africa and Egypt and up the Nile, finally joining the British below Cheren before the country was completely in British hands. He and Nick wondered aloud and without rancor why the Italians had been such lousy fighters. Mike thought it was because they didn't really think Eritrea was worth fighting for, but Nick said no, it was the leaders; they had been too afraid of losing men and equipment. There was a very stiff penalty for losing men in battle in the Italian army, Nick said. Sometimes they shot you for it. I didn't think that was true but I didn't know so I didn't contradict him.

Dave thought it was just that the country was too lovely to fight in, and when Harry pointed out that men did fight in it and had

always as far as anybody knew--using the Ethiopians and the British and even the Italians themselves as examples--Dave said yes, he knew all that, but he thought he'd keep his own theory in spite of the evidence to the contrary; it suited him.

Harry said it was the cause the Italians were fighting for. Nobody could fight very well in a bad cause. I reminded him that the Germans were fighting for the same cause and it hadn't seemed to slow them down much, and what about the white men in the Western United States when they fought the American Indians? He said that the cause in the Indian wars hadn't been bad; it had worked to the ultimate good of everybody, even though there was no doubt that some individuals had been treated unjustly. I didn't think the Indians would agree that it had worked to their ultimate good but Harry shushed me as I was trying to make the point; the hyenas were gathering on the bait.

We could scarcely see them, slinking gray shadows that blended with the ash-colored moonlight of the slope, but we could hear them clearly enough.

"Anybody else want a shot?" Harry asked.

"I'll have a go," Mike said, "but I'm not going to shoot unless I can get in a killing shot. I don't like wounding them so they run off and die, even if they are hyenas."

I agreed to operate the lights, and when Mike and Harry whispered that they were in position--one on each side of the jeep--I pulled the light switch.

Three very large hyenas tugged against each other at the carcass; half a dozen other smaller beasts skulked around the edge of the group of three, and they were all frozen for an instant in the beam

of light.

If Mike fired at all, I never heard him. Harry let loose almost in my ear with a Thompson sub-machine gun, cutting two of the big hyenas off their feet before they moved and chopping down the third no more than six feet from the first two. Then he sprang away from the jeep to get a clearer field of fire, firing as he went and killing two smaller hyenas as they fled toward the wadi and finally tumbling one end over end into the wadi just as it was about to escape. I've seen some guys who were pretty good with a Thompson and who had a lot more at stake than Harry had that night, but I've never seen anybody give a better performance.

"Now run away, you sons of bitches!" he shouted. "Ow! Damn, that barrel's hot!"

The gun had jammed on the last burst. Harry stood in the light, slipped the magazine off the gun, and cleared the breech. There was a stink of powder in the air, and of hot oil and cosmoline, and the hot gun smoked in Harry's hand.

"You get any, Mike?"

"No."

"I didn't mean to hog all of them," Harry said. "That's the way to get those devils, though. Gun them down. They aren't game anyway."

We didn't go down to look at the hyenas. Harry was elated and wanted to talk and as none of the rest of us were ready to turn in, we decided to drive on until we got tired.

We easily followed our backtrail through the wadi country toward Massawa. We drove slowly and where the country would allow it we drove along side by side so that we could all see the game that got up

in front of our trucks. Small rodents ran out in front of us all the time, and though we'd never seen any in daytime in that country, that night we saw an abundance of rabbits. Little blue desert foxes, too, scampered out of the light of the trucks, and ground owls and hunting night-hawks, and once we saw a clumsy aardvark which Nick wanted to shoot. He was very disappointed that the aardvark got into its burrow before we could take it; its meat, he said, was as white and sweet as the finest pork loin.

Dave rode the hood of the weapons carrier with the shotgun for a while and managed to take five rabbits which he shot sitting or running, indiscriminately, just so they were far enough away that the shot would not tear them up too badly, and we stopped each time he shot one to dress it and put it on the ice.

It was comfortable riding along in our shirtsleeves, though when we had to run down a rabbit Dave had wounded, we were all panting and sweating with the few moments' exertion.

Thus we made our unhurried way across the wadi country like a farmer's children wandering in their home acres. Nick undoubtedly was reliving part of his own life; Harry was full of the triumph over the country he had achieved by gunning the hyenas; Mike and I were storing the sense of the night, strange and warm and sweet, in our memories, hoarding it to use on other, thinner, colder nights; Dave's pleasure was the quietest and keenest, for though he joined in our play, I saw him look from time to time out into the desert night around us with the expression of a very lucky man looking at his bride in that fleet-instant when they stand absolutely alone in a church full of people.

We made camp, finally, at the old fort south of Massawa, and

slept for a few hours. We checked in with Woodruff in Massawa the next morning and then drove up to Ghinda, where we stopped to cook lunch near the burned-out ruins of Louie's cafe.

We sat on the rock foundation of the cafe eating fried rabbit and looking out over the valley where Dave had been in the plane crash. Dave pointed out the spot to Nick and Nick nodded; he knew it, he said--his father's farm had been not too far from there.

It was cool at Ghinda in the deep shade of the trees around the parking lot. The rains had washed out the blackness of the fire and green growing things were already covering the burned ruins. Harry thought that if his business in East Africa was successful, he might try to buy the place from Carla. It would be a great place for a summer house, he thought, and close enough to Massawa to serve his purpose.

We picked bananas and tangerines from the abandoned orchards around Ghinda and some ripe papayas which we had to throw away because we had run out of sugar and they are not fit to eat without it; then we drove slowly up the mountain, eating the fruit and littering the roadside with fruitskins.

CHAPTER XVI

Dr. Delucca was still at the dispensary when we arrived at the post. Dave and I unloaded our gear on the steps of the dispensary, and while Dave and Delucca carried the samples and specimens into the examining room and began going over them, I sorted out the rest of the gear and put it away or stored it temporarily in my room to be cleaned later if it needed it.

As I brought the last load of gear from the steps, I noticed Carla in the waiting room, sitting at the desk, watching me. I stopped in the doorway.

"Hello. I didn't know you were still here. You've missed your ride with Mrs. Melotti, haven't you?"

"I've been riding with Doctor Delucca. We were just about to leave when you got back."

"Yeah--well, it sounds like you've got a while to wait."

We could hear Delucca and Dave through the door to the examining room, talking excitedly together. Carla didn't say anything; after a minute I said, "Want a coke or something? I've got some in the refrigerator in my room."

She made a vague movement with her head which I took to mean yes, so I took the armload of gear to my room, dumped it, filled two glasses with ice cubes, and took the glasses and two bottles of coke into the waiting room.

I put them on the desk in front of Carla. "Open them, will you? I need something to put in mine."

I went into the examining room and got the bottle out of Dave's desk. I didn't ask him; I thought he probably owed me a drink. De-lucca nodded to me and went on with his discussion. Dave smiled as I walked by him with the bottle.

I poured liquor over the ice in my glass. Carla pushed her glass toward me without saying anything, so I poured her a shot and added coke to both drinks.

She took a drink, made a face, and said, "I've lost, haven't I, Al?"

"I guess so, if you can lose what you never had."

"Yes, that's right. I never had him. I should have, but I never did."

She spoke with an amazing, cold detachment; she might have been discussing the fine points of the plot of a movie. She seemed a great deal older than she had the week before. "I wonder where I went wrong. There must have been something I could have done. Something, someplace, sometime . . ."

She took another little sip of the drink, made another face, and pushed it aside. "It's bitter, like medicine."

"Some people use it for that. Look, there's no use hanging around here. No telling how long those two will go on talking. I sent the jeep down with Costa to be washed, but I can get another one from the motor pool. Want me to run you home?"

She listened to the two doctors in the other room for a moment, then said, "If it isn't too much trouble, Al."

The dispatcher at the motor pool didn't have a driver available. "Isn't there anybody around there?" I asked.

"Just Lieutenant Lester."

"Well, hell, he'll do. Ask him to bring the jeep by on his way to his quarters. Tell him it's for Sergeant Shannon."

Harry brought the jeep up and decided to go downtown with us.

"I'll buy you a plate of steak and eggs," he said. "You too, Carla, if you aren't ashamed to eat with us, dirty as we are."

Both of us were unshaven and dirty, our clothes caked with brine and dust from the desert, and I didn't blame Carla for declining the invitation, though she was polite enough to say that she had something else to do.

"We stopped by Ghinda on the way back," Harry said. "It's a beautiful place. You know, if you don't have any plans for the place, I'd like to buy it from you, Carla. I suppose it's yours now, isn't it?"

She considered that idea as though it had never occurred to her before. "If it is, you can have it, Harry. I don't want it."

"I'll pay you for it, of course. I suppose there's a title to it someplace. Did you find one among your Grandfather's things? He surely must have bought it from somebody."

She smiled the first smile I'd seen from her that day. "I don't think Nonno bought it. We just moved in one day after the fighting was over. I'll look for a title, but I don't think there is one. If he ever had one, it burned in the fire. Anyway, you can have the place."

"No, I couldn't do that. I want to pay you what it's worth. You don't understand these things, Carla. People don't just grab what they want."

"They do if there's no other way," she said.

We were in front of her apartment. She swung her legs gracefully out of the jeep and onto the sidewalk and the rest of her followed in an easy, flowing surge. How many women have you seen who could get out of a jeep without looking like beached porpoises with their tails caught in rabbit traps? She could.

She turned to us, brushed the black hair back from the side of her face, and said, "Good-by. You've both been very good to me."

"What does that mean?" I asked, but she went across the sidewalk and into the building without replying.

The next day was a busy one. Everybody who'd been holding off coming on sick call until Dave got back came in that morning, so he was seeing patients until lunchtime and still we had to carry a few over until afternoon.

I discovered that Carla had fallen behind in posting the records of examinations and treatments to the individual medical records; as a matter of fact, she hadn't done any work on them from the day we left for Uangabo. That's just plain damn stubbornness, I thought; I'll give her hell for it after lunch.

But she wasn't there after lunch. I took care of the waiting room, finished up the morning sick call, and began catching up on the records, and she still hadn't come.

Usually Dave stopped in the waiting room for a coke or a cup of coffee and some conversation with the inevitable collection of loafers, but that day he went straight from his examining room to the lab.

When Carla wasn't there by three o'clock, I told one of the loafers that if anybody wanted me, I'd be back in a minute, and I went across the street to the lab.

Dave was making slides of some of the water samples we had taken at Uangabo.

"I don't know whether you noticed," I said, "but Carla didn't come to work this afternoon."

He took his eye away from the microscope long enough to squint me into focus. "Maybe she's not feeling good. Call the Regina and see if she was there this morning."

He went back to his slide.

"I don't think she's coming back," I said.

"That could be." He wrote something in a notebook, took the slide off the microscope, and put on another slide. "Say, Al, while you're on the phone, leave a message for Delucca to call me when he can, will you?" he said as I was leaving.

Tesfi put the call through to the Regina and finally reached a Sister of Charity whom I knew and who spoke English. "Miss Stone came by this morning to tell us that she was withdrawing from training," she told me in answer to my query.

"Miss Stone?"

"That's the name she was registered under," the Sister explained. "It's the English equivalent of her grandfather's surname--'Pietra,' you know. Her own antecedents were--well, irregular, and she went by her grandfather's family name. I supposed you knew that."

"No."

"Well," she said, dismissing the whole subject, "Carla was a very promising student and we hated to see her go, but it was her decision and there was nothing we could say to dissuade her."

"Did she say what she intended to do?"

"No, I wasn't able to discover her plans. I thought at one time that she might join us in the Order, but when I suggested it this morning, she was not interested."

By the time I had finished the call, people began arriving for the afternoon sick-call, again more than usual, and I didn't get anything done on the records during the afternoon.

I told Dave that Carla had quit at the Regina, too, and he said that was a shame; I thought he would have more to say at supper that evening but he and Delucca ate downtown and then went to the lab, so if he had anything more to say on the subject, I didn't get to hear it.

I worked late on the records that evening without finishing them. I was just putting them away when Truskowski came into the dispensary. He was tight and in a good mood.

"Puttin' in a little overtime, eh? You make the Doc pay you time an' a half for workin' late?"

"Nah--the pay's the same, if I do or if I don't. Doc buys the drinks, though. You want one?"

"That'll be the day, when ol' Truss turns down a drink."

I fixed us each a drink. "You lost your hired help. That's why you're workin' so late," Truss said.

"Yeah, she quit. Just didn't show up yesterday. I don't know where she went."

"I do," Truss said. "She's workin' at the Odeon."

"At the Odeon? Doing what?"

"Come on, Al--what would a good lookin' broad like Carla be doin' at the Odeon? Keepin' the books? She's dancin' with the

customers and hustlin' drinks--what else? An' five'll get you seven she's makin' more there in a night than she made here in a whole week."

"Just off drinks?"

"So far. 'Course this is just her second night. If she's branched out into a sideline, you could find out from Bill Brooks. Ol' Bill Brooks, he's givin' her plenty of play last night and to-night. Probably blow his whole roll tonight, 'cause the shifts change and he's got to go on afternoons tomorrow."

He took a long sip of his drink. "Good stuff," he said.

"Carla's drinkin' I. W. Harper and coke."

What he was telling me was that she was drinking the most expensive drink in the house. There probably wasn't a bottle of I. W. Harper within a mile of the Odeon, but since there wasn't any whiskey in her drinks anyway, it didn't make any difference; the guy who paid for the drink got charged for what she ordered, not what she drank. You could tell what a cabaret girl thought of herself by what she ordered; she wanted to get what she could without pricing herself out of the market.

Truss took another drink. "Old Doc, he had a good thing goin' for him there with Carla, I always thought," he said. "I kind've thought he'd marry her, maybe. Then he got hung up on doin' the missionary bit in the desert."

He finished the drink. "Well, he probably knows what he's doin'. I got a feelin' that he generally does."

"Want another drink, Truss?"

He looked at the bottle longingly but declined with a determined

shake of his head. "I got to go on day shift in the morning, an' I'm right to the point where another drink'd send me back downtown for the rest of the night. Doc don't know about Carla working at the Odeon, huh?"

"I don't think so. He's hardly been out of the lab since we came back, except to come over here to take sick-call."

"Well, I hope he won't take it too hard. I guess he won't. I can't think of any man who ever lost anything when a dame left him, can you?"

Dave was still in the lab, though Delucca had gone. He didn't change expression when I told him about Carla; he already knew it.

"Maybe we ought to run down and talk to her," I said.

"What--tonight? What for? What could we say? If she wants to work down there, we can't stop her."

"Maybe you could talk her into coming back here--or at least into taking a different kind of job."

"I don't think so. Anyway, it's too late tonight. It's Tuesday and the Odeon will already be closed."

"Tomorrow night, then?"

"I'll think about it. If I think it will do any good, I'll go."

We were not quite so rushed around the dispensary the following morning as we had been, but we were busy until noon, and after lunch when I had just settled at the desk and made up my mind to finish the work on the records, Crimmons came in.

"Hello, Short-timer."

"Short-timer yourself. When are we leaving--have you heard?"

"First group leaves the first of the month--or as soon after

that as we can get shipping space."

"The first of the month! You're kidding."

"Sure I am, boy, sure I am. Keep saying that. Yell it out the plane window as you take off."

I began to believe him. "That's only two weeks off," I said.

"Who's on the first group orders?"

"Eight in all--Major Wilson and seven enlisted men, including me and Mike and you."

"Me? Where in the hell is my replacement?"

"Oh, we'll find one for you. You want to go with Mike and me, don't you? You gotta go in a few weeks at the most, anyway. And your buddy Kettar will be commander when Wilson leaves. Hell, I'll send you one of my fireball clerks from the orderly room for a replacement. We don't want to leave without you."

"Very touching. But get somebody down here so I can break him in, will you?"

"If you guys weren't so hard on your help, you'd have plenty. Why, you had a clerk here that had the whole post drooling, and damn if you didn't let her walk off the job."

"She went on to greater things."

"So I heard. You ought to have offered her the greater things, so she wouldn't have to go looking for them. I've always known you were soft-headed, but I'd think Doc would've had enough sense to give her what she was after."

"Couldn't meet her price," Dave said from the door.

He startled both of us and I had the satisfaction of seeing Crimmons abashed for an instant.

"Damn, you're getting sneaky," I said. "You're supposed to knock before you enter, especially when we're talking about you. I thought you were over in the lab."

"I was, but when I saw bad news Crimmons here come in, I wanted to hear what he had to say. I heard the rumor, Crimmons, but what are the details? How long?"

"We'll be on orders on the first of the month for shipment by first available transport. Probably get out of here by the tenth."

"Mike too?"

"Yep."

Dave sat on the corner of the desk and thought for a minute. "Can you fix us up a week's leave? The four of us? Starting, say, next Sunday?"

Crimmons whistled and grinned. "You don't want much, do you, Captain?"

After a five minute explanation of why it couldn't be done, Crimmons finally conceded that it was worth trying and promised to get started on it if Dave could assure him that there would be a doctor available to take care of our duties while we were gone.

"I'll get the doctor. You get to work on the leaves. I've got a fifth of fourteen-year-old, 150-proof calvados that says you can have it all fixed up by Friday night."

"If that's bribery, Doc, I'm susceptible. How about you, Al-- you care to grease the wheels a little?"

"I haven't even said I'd go."

"If I bust my hump fixing you a week's leave, you better go."

"When you going to send me down a replacement?"

"I'll send you Bradley, first thing in the morning."

"Bradley? He's your first clerk. You leave and he comes down here, who's going to run the orderly room?"

Crimmons grinned again. "They'll get along. Anyway, that's Kettar's problem, isn't it? We won't be here. After all, I owe the man something." And he left.

"Call Mike and let him know," Dave said. "I'll see Delucca this evening about handling things while we're gone. Harry will drag his feet a little, but he can be persuaded. You want to tackle him, or shall I? I'll tell you, you get hold of him, and if you have any trouble with him, I'll talk to him."

"When am I supposed to do these?" I asked, waving my arm over the desk full of records.

"Do what you can, and let the others go. Take Crimmons' view; they're really my problem, anyway, and after all, you owe me something. I'll be in the lab if anybody wants me."

If Mike was surprised at Dave's plan, he didn't show it; he was bored with the station and ready to go anywhere to get away from it, and as he pointed out, the leave time wouldn't be worth anything much when he got to the States, anyway.

I was calling Harry's office when Harry walked in the door, wanting to know what had happened to Carla.

"If you didn't bury yourself in that supply office, you'd know what goes on," I told him. "She left us; that's what happened to her."

"I heard that she's working at the Odeon. As a common cabaret girl." He sounded angry. "Dave ought to go talk to her."

"He's thinking about it. Why don't you go over to the lab and

ask him if he's come to a decision?"

He glared at me. "It's nothing to kid about, Al. Carla working in a place like that."

He went out the door headed for the lab. You think you're going to stir Dave up so he'll go down and talk Carla into coming back, I thought, and what you're really going to do is be talked into taking a week's leave to Uangabo.

I started to work on the records again, but it wasn't my afternoon for doing records; I had another interruption, this time in the form of Mrs. Thorne

I rose and offered her a chair. I still wasn't used to civilians in the dispensary and I didn't feel comfortable when they came in.

"The doctor is across the street in the lab," I said. "I'll get him for you."

"It isn't necessary, Sergeant. I came to ask about Carla. I heard that she is working in one of the clubs downtown. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"She stayed with me, you know, after her grandfather's death, for a while. I liked her, Sergeant. I suppose you would say I grew fond of her--that sounds so artificial, doesn't it? I don't mean it to be. I hate thinking of Carla working in a place like the Odeon."

She was so sincere and genuinely concerned that it embarrassed me. "She'll be all right, Mrs. Thorne," I said. "I don't think the Odeon is such a bad place and she can take care of herself."

She smiled thinly and said, "Sergeant Shannon, I married my husband before the war when he was a corporal in the regular army, and I've lived around army camps most of the time since then. No

woman can take care of herself in a place like the Odeon for long, a fact which you know as well as I. And the more confidence she has in her ability to do so, the quicker she is destroyed."

I shrugged. "I don't know what we can do about it."

"First, why did she leave here? Was her work unsatisfactory?"

"No, it wasn't that."

"It was something between her and the doctor, then?"

"I think you ought to ask him about that."

"I have asked you, Sergeant, and I believe you have answered me--to an extent. She's in love with him, of course; that was obvious to me every time I saw them together. It must have been apparent to him, too."

She waited for me to comment on that. When I didn't, she said, "I wonder if he took advantage of the way she felt about him--I don't suppose you'd care to say."

That stirred me. "Yes, Mrs. Thorne, I would care to say. He didn't. Ever. And God knows he didn't lack opportunity. Her leaving was no fault of Dave's, I can tell you that."

"There was nothing he could do to prevent it?" Her tone was milder.

"Nothing short of marrying her. And he doesn't love her. He felt sorry for her and was kind to her, and even after she fell in love with him, he did what he could to help her. I suppose that was a mistake, in the long run."

"I'm sure it was," Mrs. Thorne said. She sat with her hands in her lap, her head turned away from me, looking out the window into the clear sunshine. "She talked, you know, as though there were some

understanding between them. I was sure there was. She's so vibrant, so full of life and charm and hope--why, she could pass as a model of young American womanhood."

I had the feeling that Mrs. Thorne had paid Carla the highest compliment she could pay a woman.

"And to think of her, working in that--that place! It's unbelievable."

Mrs. Thorne turned her head to look at me; I tried to register unbelief and muttered something in agreement. Her gaze made me uncomfortable; I looked out the window at the brown guard shack with the native guard dozing inside, and at the eucalyptus trees standing green-black and solid against the blue sky and the white hospital. None of it had changed from the first time I saw it through the window; the colors were as deep, as positive, as pure in the thin and windless air as they had always been.

The change was not out there, but inside the room, inside me, in an elusive and indefinable pattern of involvement that I wanted to ignore and couldn't.

Mrs. Thorne stood up. "Has Dr. Wright seen the girl since she quit?"

"I don't think so. She only quit yesterday. He's been awfully busy . . ."

"He must. You must both go to talk to her, this evening if possible. Tell her that if there is anything I can do to help her . . ."

I promised. We would go, we would do our best to persuade Carla to give up her job at the Odeon, we would let her know that she had friends on the post. I was tired to death of Mrs. Thorne; I would

have promised almost anything to be rid of her, and finally she left.

The records were on the desk, still untouched. That's Dave's problem, I thought. Carla is Dave's problem, and Mrs. Thorne and Harry. All his problems. I have no problems. I put my feet on the desk on top of some of the records and stared out the window. I was very tired and the brightness assaulted my eyes so that I closed them, but the blue and green and the amazing white of the hospital stayed in my mind, the shapes and colors sharp and clear and neatly framed in the dispensary window.

Dave whacked me across the feet with a book and I woke with a start.

"Come on, it's supper time, and we've got to go downtown this evening."

"Ah--Mrs. Thorne came to see you, did she?"

"Mrs. Thorne? No; was she looking for me? Well, I can't see her this evening unless it's urgent because I promised Harry that we'd go talk to Carla. I hope you don't mind. What did Mrs. Thorne want?"

"She wanted you to promise that we'd go talk to Carla. I promised for you. I hope you don't mind." He grinned. "I promised in order to get rid of her. I suppose you did the same with Harry?"

"Not exactly. He blackmailed me. I had to promise before he would consent to take a week's leave and go with us."

"He's learning."

We got to the Odeon early, before Carla got there. Some of the girls offered to sit with us, but I waved them away. We were at a table in a corner so that Carla passed close to us without seeing us.

"Miss Stone," I called, and she did a double take, came back,

and sat with us.

"My friends call me Carla," she said. She was wearing a sky-blue gown that was low at the bottom and low at the top; it fitted her perfectly without hiding any of the grace of her movements--or hiding much else either, for that matter. The gown was exactly the wrong color for the dim, red-toned light of the cabaret--it was right for sunlight and vegetation green; it was right for a blowing skirt on a summer afternoon--and it was dead wrong for that cabaret; in that light it should have looked cheap and gaudy and futilely school-girl-ish, but on her it was regal. Her shoulders and face were sculptured marble above the dress, and the thick black hair that framed her face and fell straight to her shoulders was the warmest thing about her. She wore very little make-up and no jewelry except a cameo necklace on a thin gold chain; the cameo might have been carved in relief on her breast, white on white.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

I realized I had been staring. "It's very beautiful."

"It belonged to my mother."

A waiter came to take our order; Carla said something to him in Italian and dismissed him with an imperious motion of her hand, and to my surprise, he left.

"Why have you come here?" she asked Dave.

"To talk to you about coming back. Weren't you expecting me?"

"What is there to talk about?"

"Well, we might begin with why you left."

"I got tired of being a nurse."

"You could have said something to us."

"I could have. Would it have made any difference?"

They ignored me; for all the attention they paid me, I might have been in Atlanta, in Georgia. She leaned across the table toward him and glared at him, and I had the strange feeling that I was watching a movie, that she was speaking lines she had rehearsed and worked on and polished.

She brushed black hair out of her face and tossed it over her shoulder with a dipping motion of her head, her eyes never leaving his face. "Would it have made any real difference if I had come to you, Dave? If I had told you what I was going to do? What would you have done, Dave? Would you have tried to keep me?"

Dave didn't look away; he said crisply. "If you had told me you were tired of nursing, I'd have tried to talk you out of leaving, of course. Certainly I could have found you another job on the post--or even downtown. You didn't have to lower yourself to this. There are any number of things you can do to make a living. You know I'll help you in any way I can."

"Any way but one." Her eyes flashed and her voice rose; there was deep bitterness in it and she was no longer speaking lines she knew. "But I mustn't mention that one way, must I? A man can sigh and sing sad songs, or pant and paw like a puppy, when he wants a woman; if he's enough man, he can force her or buy her. But what can a woman do? Buy a new dress, comb her hair, and sit and smile and wait for him to notice. Do what he does and like what he likes and make herself always be there and always ready. Hope that sometime he'll look at her and want her. And suppose he never does? Then she can do without him or find someone to take his place."

"I shouldn't have come," Dave said.

"Not if you came to offer me more records to keep, more charts, more stupid thermometers. Why did you? Why? Did you really think I would go back?"

"I didn't. Some of your friends did--Mrs. Thorne, Harry, Al. They thought you might."

She looked at me blankly for a moment, suddenly remembering I was there, and then looked back at Dave again.

"For what? To keep the dispensary for you while you run around at Uangabo? It's nice to have friends. Tell Harry to drop by and buy me a drink, if he's such a great friend. Did he think I'd make a good nurse, too? Tell him I'm a good hostess. 'You buy me dreenk, Gee Eye? Zit wit Carla an have nice dreenk, okay? We be good friends, eh, Joe?' How's that? Am I learning? You used to tell me I learned fast."

"Let's go," Dave said to me. He got up and started walking out without looking back and I followed.

"Give all the boys at Radio Marina my love," Carla called after us.

On the way back to the post Dave made plans out loud for the week at Uangabo--when we'd leave, what we'd take, how long we'd spend in the main village and how long at the others. If he had ever heard of Carla, you couldn't tell it from the way he talked. I listened to his plans and thought of Carla all the time.

When we got to the post, I said, "Let's go have a drink at the club."

"Go ahead. I've got some stuff to do in the lab. Look, if you

see Mike and Harry, tell them we'd better get together tomorrow. We can decide what supplies to take and that will give us all day Friday to get the stuff together. And don't worry about Carla, Al. She knows what she's doing. Things are probably better the way they are than--well, you know--than with her hanging around here working at something she doesn't like, hoping for something to happen that's never going to happen. She's better off; I'm sure of it. Quit thinking of her as a defenseless little girl; that's a mistake we've all made. I don't know whether you noticed it, but she's a woman, and she's a woman who can look after herself--you can bet on that."

There was a suggestion of admiration in his tone. I said, "Oh, I noticed it, all right. A long time ago. I don't know whether you noticed it, but she's also a damned angry woman. Would it do any good to remind you that hell hath no fury and so forth?"

"Yeah--we left just ahead of the eye-ball scratching stage, didn't we? Now don't forget to tell Harry and Mike, will you? Tomorrow evening will be fine if they can make it."

So we got together the following evening but there wasn't much planning to do because Dave had done most of it and what the meeting amounted to was his telling us what each one was supposed to arrange for. He did that and got up to go to the lab.

Harry said, "Did you talk to Carla?"

"Yes. It didn't do any good. I didn't think it would."

"What did she say? Why did she leave?"

"She said she was tired of nursing, that's all. She got pretty mad before we left."

"Mad?"

"Angry that we had come. She seemed to resent it."

Dave went on to the lab. Harry said to me, "I don't understand it. What was she angry about? I'd think she would at least be grateful that somebody cared enough about her to try to talk her out of ruining her life. Maybe I'll go down and see her this evening."

"Sure, why not? She said to tell you to drop by and buy her a drink."

Harry left and Mike said, "Do you think he will go see her?"

"I suppose he will. I think he's half stuck on her, Mike. It never occurred to me till now, but I'll bet if old Harry wasn't married, he'd make a play for her."

I poured Mike a drink and had one myself and Mike said, "I'll bet she'd marry him, too."

I said, "Not right away. She's still in love with Dave. Maybe she always will be, a little, anyway. Maybe she'll never marry anybody."

Mike finished his drink. "Her mother was a whore," he said.

"I'll see you in the morning."

And he left before I could ask him what in the hell he meant by that.

Crimmons sent Bradley, the best clerk he had, up the next morning to train as my replacement. Bradley worked with me in the morning and that afternoon I got him started on the records while I rounded up the equipment I was responsible for, which was bedrolls, lanterns, sub-machine guns and ammo, cooking utensils--that sort of thing.

I had it all together early in the afternoon, piled on the steps of the dispensary. Mike was taking care of the trucks, the gas, the water, and the ice chest, Dave was looking after the medical equipment,

and Harry was supposed to get the food supplies. Since we were taking mostly dry and canned food, I thought Harry would bring it up to the dispensary but the afternoon wore on and he didn't show.

I tried to get him on the phone, but they said at his office that he hadn't been there all day. I checked his quarters; the door was open but he wasn't there and there wasn't any sign of the food he was supposed to collect.

I told Dave that I couldn't find Harry, that maybe he'd gone off on another binge.

Dave thought a minute. "It doesn't seem likely, but I can't think where else he could be."

"When he left last night, he said he was going to see Carla."

Dave frowned. "What would he do that for? Well, listen, we've got to have that food and the commissary will close before long. I'll give you a list of the stuff we need and you go down there and get it. If Harry already has the food, we can always turn some of it back in; none of it will spoil. In the meantime, I'll try to find Harry."

I got the food and stacked it on the steps with the other gear. As I was walking over to the guard shack to ask the guard to keep an eye on the stuff, I noticed that the sky was clouding over. The guard pointed to the banks of clouds and I shrugged and told him that the rainy season was over. By the time I got back from the guard shack the clouds had come on heavily. The sky was dark except for great limbs of lightning standing out against the clouds and the rain poured down.

Tesfi was so badly frightened by the unusual storm that he wouldn't come as far as the steps to help Bradley and me move the gear

into the hallway. Some of the gear got wet and I cursed Tesfi for a superstitious Ethiopian idiot who thought the world was flat and who was afraid of a little rain, but I couldn't move him; I couldn't get anything out of him except that the sudden and unexpected storm meant bad luck. I think that if the storm hadn't ended, he would have spent the night in the dispensary rather than go out in it; as it was, he probably spent at least part of the night in church praying that the bad luck would happen to somebody else.

By evening Dave still hadn't found Harry, so Mike and I loaded the heavy gear by ourselves. We brought the trucks up from the motor pool early the next morning and by eight o'clock we had everything loaded and ready to go. Harry was still missing and as we sat on the steps waiting for him and not knowing exactly what to do, Kettar came by on his way to the station. He wanted to see Harry about something to do with signal equipment at the station and we finally had to tell him that Harry wasn't there yet and that we didn't know where he was.

Kettar thought we ought to report his absence to the sergeant-major. "You can't tell what might have happened to him in a town like this," Kettar said. "Maybe we ought to get a search party out looking for him. Anyway," he told Dave, "you can't leave until he shows up."

If Dave had his own idea about that, he was wise enough to keep his mouth shut.

Dr. Delucca arrived to take over Dave's duties at the dispensary and he and Dave went inside. Kettar was still hanging around when a taxi pulled up at the main gate and Harry crawled out, tossed some money to the driver, and walked unsteadily but rapidly through the gate, ignoring the salute of the guard on duty.

"Where in the hell is Wright?" he said. His face was flushed and his eyes were heavy; he was drunk and mad as hell and looked like he hadn't slept in a week.

"Inside talking to Delucca," Mike said. "You picked a poor time to fall off the wagon."

Kettar hadn't given up; he was still there, and he said something to Harry and tried to grab him by the arm, but Harry shrugged out of Kettar's grasp and started up the steps at the same time that Dave came out of the door.

Harry lunged at Dave and swung a wild roundhouse punch that would have missed by a foot even if Dave hadn't moved.

In an instant Mike grabbed Harry by the arm and I closed in behind him. Between the two of us we held him while he struggled and cursed Dave.

Thick-voiced and choking with rage, he screamed and threatened like a maniac. It was a great scene and we didn't lack an audience, for the bus bringing the night shift from the station pulled up to the mess hall and Harry's voice carried that far easily. The men off the bus stood listening, some of them even taking a few uncertain steps toward the dispensary so as not to miss anything.

Tears streamed down Harry's face and he finally screamed himself out of breath and lapsed into sobs of drunken futility.

"Bring him inside," Dave said. He had not moved or shown any emotion throughout the tirade.

We almost lost Harry going through the doorway as he lunged at Dave's back, but we managed to get him inside, finally. As we struggled through the door with him, he was screaming over and over, "I'll kill

him! I'll beat him to a pulp! I'll kill him."

"Break it up!" Kettar told the small crowd that had gathered. "It's none of your concern--go on about your business." I wished he would take his own advice but he followed us into the dispensary.

We took Harry into my room and got him into an over-stuffed chair. It was my best piece of furniture and I hoped that he wouldn't vomit on it. I offered him a glass of water which he tasted, then rejected in contempt.

"Haven't you got anything fit to drink?"

"It appears to me that you've had all you need and more," Kettar said from the doorway.

That was my opinion, too, but I hated to agree with Kettar, so I dug out a bottle of scotch I had hoarded for our return from Uangabo, broke the seal, and poured Harry a short drink.

He drank it and leaned forward with a sigh, supporting his head with his hands. Then he began to talk, half the time incoherently. We got out of him that he had gone to the Odeon the night before and stayed there until the place closed, taking Carla home afterward, and that he spent the night in her apartment drinking and talking to her and her roommate. The point of his rambling story was that sometime during the night she told him--confessed to him, as he put it--that the reason she left the post was that Dave had gotten her pregnant.

"And then ran her off," he kept saying. "Told her it would be best for everybody. Pushed her out the door." That idea really bothered him, and he repeated it several times.

I didn't see how he could have swallowed such a story, drunk though he was, but there was no doubt that he believed it. Kettar

took it all in, and as Harry rambled on, Kettar closed the door behind him and came closer to listen, glancing now and then at Dave as though he thought Dave ought to deny the whole thing, but Dave didn't say a word.

Harry wanted another drink so I gave it to him. He drank a little of it and spilled the rest on my best chair, leaned back, and closed his eyes.

"Think we ought to give him something?" I asked Dave.

"No. He'll sleep it off. Just leave him alone for the time being."

"Well, I guess this spoils your trip, eh?" Kettar said. "You certainly can't take him with you in that condition. And if he were sober, I don't believe he'd go, do you? Too bad. This was about the last hunting trip for you two, wasn't it?" he said to Mike and me.

Mike nodded. Dave went out of the room, leaving the three of us standing there looking awkwardly at Harry and at the floor and at each other until finally Kettar said, "Well, I can't talk to him now. When he sobers up, tell him to call me--or maybe I'll see him tonight."

On his way out he stopped, thought a minute, and added, "That's a nasty little story he tells. Of course, I don't believe it for a minute, but I think the doctor ought to do what he can to squelch a rumor like that. There are a lot of people around who are only too willing to believe that where there's smoke, there's fire. You know how people are--maybe Dr. Wright ought to go talk to the girl, make her deny the story. Surely she'll be forced to admit the truth if he confronts her face to face. The sooner, the better, I'd say."

"I don't know about that," I couldn't help saying, "If we wait

a few months, it ought to be pretty obvious that she's lying, don't you think?"

Kettar grinned at that. "Yes--I hadn't thought of that."

Dave came back in after Kettar had gone and told us to carry Harry, who was sleeping soundly, out to the weapons carrier and bed him down in the back, and neither of us argued with him; we were both ready to go to Uangabo one way or another. We carried Harry out under the curious eyes of half a dozen men who had found some excuse to come on sick call, and a dozen more who had gathered around the trucks. Ignoring their questions, we climbed into the trucks and pulled away.

We had piled duffle in the front of the jeep to make room for Harry in the weapons carrier, so Dave rode with Mike and I was alone in the jeep. I felt rotten as we left town, thinking about Carla and what a fool she had made of Harry and wondering what she thought she could possibly gain from it. She'd done it for spite, I decided--the satisfaction of seeing Dave squirm. Maybe from her point of view he had treated her badly. That depended on how you looked at it. So did everything else, though, as far as that went. Whose fault was it if one man's dream was another man's nightmare? Carla's dream might make more sense to most people than Dave's did, but that didn't change anything. It was his dream, and perhaps there had been a time when she could have shared it with him, but there never had been a time when she could have taken it away from him.

We cleared the blockade and started down the mountain somewhat later in the morning than we'd planned but while the air was still cool and pleasantly fresh. Giant euphorbias and aloes glistened sleek and oily-green in the sun and rivulets from the freak shower the night

before sparkled in the ditches. A herd of baboons scampered across the road in front of us and barked baboon curses at us for making them run. I scowled at them and stuck out my tongue; I had my own problems.

When we stopped for a break a few miles above Ghinda, I put the top down on the jeep and folded the windshield flat against the hood. I drove that way with the mountain air fresh against my face. My sunglasses kept the wind from my eyes but it pushed against my cheeks and when I tried to whistle, it sucked the sound from my lips before it could be fully formed; it was a masterpiece I was whistling, but the world never heard it. Your loss, world, I said to myself. Tough it is, too true, but I can't look after everybody. I was feeling better.

That's the kind of nonsense I was thinking as I followed the weapons carrier down the mountain that morning and the closer we came to the desert, the better I felt.

On the hot plains outside Massawa I peeled off my jacket first and then my shirt, steering the jeep on the flat road with my knees as I slipped out of them. The hot, dry air pressed my T-shirt against me and whistled around my face, drawing me forward, sucking me into the desert, and in spite of myself I kept building up speed, crawling up on the weapons carrier and having to drop back.

We stopped at the District Administrative Headquarters in Massawa and Mike went in to check through with the DO. Dave came back to the jeep and told me I would get a bad sunburn if I didn't put the top up on the jeep and I said that I didn't give a damn; it was the last chance I'd have to get a sunburn in East Africa and how about letting me enjoy it. So he went to the weapons carrier and got some suntan

lotion and I smeared it on my arms and neck, just to make him feel useful.

While Mike was in the DO's office Harry raised himself on one elbow and stared vacantly out the back of the weapons carrier. Dave gave him a drink of water and a pill of some kind and he flopped down and went back to sleep.

We ate sandwiches on the go because we wanted to get to the big riverbed in time to make camp and hunt before dark, and it was late afternoon when we pulled into the shade of the palms. Dave started a fire while Mike dug out food and utensils. Harry crawled out of the back of the truck and stood blinking, looking very ill. I got some beer from the ice box and started to open it.

"How about one, Harry? Canned pelt of the great bounding mastiff that attacked you."

He grinned sheepishly and took the beer. "What I really need is coffee. One of these will probably put me up in the air again."

"We'll have some in a few minutes," Dave said from where he was squatting by the fire.

"You going to hunt, Harry" Mike asked.

"God, I don't know. Did I bring anything to hunt with? I guess I'll wait for a while. Where are the aspirin, Al?"

I got them for him out of the kit in the truck and then took out his rifle and shotgun and leaned them against a tree. I got my own shotgun and some shells loaded with number four buckshot, loaded the gun, and finished the beer I'd been drinking. Mike and I talked it over and decided to work up the outside of the palm fringe and move in on a waterhole about half an hour's walk up the river. More than

two hours of shooting light remained and we thought it was too early for anything to be on the waterhole, but Mike decided he would stay there until dark while I planned to work back through the palm cover and try for dik-dik. That would put me back in camp well before dark and if Harry felt like it, he and I could hunt the cover along the river below camp. I thought to myself that maybe Dave and Harry would use the time they had alone to settle their differences, although I wasn't sure they had any, now that Harry was sober. When we left, they were sitting with their backs against the weapons carrier watching the coffee perk.

There was nothing at the waterhole but there was plenty of water and the sand was pocked with tracks; game had been using it. Mike settled himself in the brush to wait and I worked my way back through the palm cover without seeing any game.

As I came up on camp from the river side across the sand I could see Dave standing with his back to me by the fire. The weapons carrier was between us and a little to one side. I couldn't see Harry, and I was about to call out to him. Suddenly there was a shot and Dave pitched forward without a sound into the fire.

I ran forward and rolled him out of the fire, brushed the embers off his clothing and dragged him a few feet away from the fire.

Harry stood by the weapons carrier, his mouth partly open, immobile as the earth he stood on. Beside him on the ground lay his rifle. His left hand held some cartridges; his right hand was empty at his side. I shouted for him to bring some water but I was wasting my breath. He didn't move a muscle.

I shook water from my canteen onto Dave's clothing in a couple

of places where it was smoldering. He was unconscious but still alive for I could feel his breathing as I loosened his clothing. The bullet had entered slightly to one side of his spine near the small of his back; it was a copper-jacketed military slug and had gone through cleanly without expanding or tumbling, coming out the lower abdomen. I couldn't tell whether it had hit the spine, but I didn't think he would still be alive if it had. There was some external bleeding but not much; what was going on inside, I could only guess at.

I ran over to Harry, who hadn't moved, and shook him until he blinked, then slapped him hard with my open hand; when he still didn't move, I did it again. He didn't even try to ward off the second blow, but he flinched and started to babble, "I didn't do it, Al. I didn't mean to do it. I was loading my rifle. I didn't do it."

"Get in the truck and start honking the horn. Don't stop until Mike comes. Don't you hear me? Get moving!"

He kept mumbling, looking back over his shoulder to where Dave lay on the ground as I led him to the truck, and he continued to mumble when I shoved him into the seat and put his hand on the horn, but he got the idea and started pressing the horn button.

I got the kit and a couple of blankets from the truck, put a four-by-four bandage over the wound front and back, and wrapped Dave in blankets. I hated to move him at all, but I knew that there was nothing we could do for him there and that the faster we got him into Massawa, the better chance he had.

By that time Harry seemed in a little better command of himself so I sent him up the river in the jeep to meet Mike. I picked up

Harry's rifle from where he had dropped it. There was an empty shell in the chamber and four cartridges in the magazine, and I unloaded it and used it and my rifle to make a litter for Dave.

We put Dave in the back of the weapons carrier on the bedroll where Harry had lain on the way out, and if he regained consciousness on the way to Massawa, he didn't make a sound. I wanted Harry to ride with Mike in the jeep, but he insisted on staying back there with Dave and he sat there not making any more noise than Dave was, staring into space.

While the British doctor in Massawa examined Dave, I called the District Officer and asked for an armed escort up the mountain, for it was after dark. I got the escort without much trouble, and could have gotten an ambulance, too, but I thought Dave would be just as comfortable in the back of the weapons carrier, the way I would rig it. What I did was borrow a litter from the dispensary and suspend it from the bows of the truck, lashing it to the side so that it couldn't sway; it was smoother than a military ambulance.

Dave regained consciousness briefly and wanted to talk but the doctor discouraged it and gave him a sedative.

"He's got to go to Asmara," the doctor said when he finished working on Dave. "He's not bleeding so badly internally, but he's got to have surgery that I can't do here."

"Will he live?"

"Can't say. He survived the shock and he's not bleeding badly. Don't know what's been done to the spine, of course. Look here, it's no good standing about; you go on. I'll call ahead and have a surgeon waiting for you. Take him directly to the Regina; they're best equipped

to handle him there."

Mike helped me load him, Harry stumbling along behind us like a sleep-walker, no longer muttering to himself but not able to be of much help, either. When Dave was settled in the truck, Harry crawled up with him, and there he sat all the way up the mountain, staring wordlessly at the inert form on the litter.

There wasn't anything I could do at the hospital so I went to my quarters and tried to sleep out what was left of the night, which wasn't much but proved to be plenty for all the sleeping I was able to do.

The next day was Sunday and normally there wouldn't be anybody around the dispensary unless somebody had a real medical emergency, which was rare, so I made coffee on the hot-plate in the waiting room and drank it at my desk there.

About nine o'clock, Bradley showed up to try to catch up on the mess of records I had dumped in his lap. He was surprised to find me there so I had to explain to him about the accident and that Dave was downtown in the Regina, and he said that was a hell of a shame and would I please move my coffee so he could get to work. He was a good clerk and I knew they would miss him in the orderly room.

I called the Regina several times and finally talked to Dr. De-lucca, who told me that I wouldn't be able to see Dave that day but that I would be notified when I could see him, and I had to settle for that.

Crimmons called later in the morning and said that Wilson wanted to see me in his quarters so I walked up to his BOQ.

There wasn't enough furniture to go around that morning in the

Major's room; he had the overstuffed chair, Crimmons was in the chair at the writing desk, and Mike was parked on a footstool by the window. Wilson waved toward the bed.

"Sit down, Shannon. I called you up here to get your story of what happened down there yesterday."

I glanced at Mike; his face was expressionless. "Harry was loading a rifle. It went off and hit Dave."

"Go on." I looked at Mike again. Wilson repeated, "Go on. I've heard Mike's story. I need to hear yours."

I shrugged. "I came up just as the rifle went off. Dave dropped into the fire and I pulled him out . . ."

"Start at the beginning," Crimmons said. I noticed that he was taking notes. "Where were you standing? Where was Harry? Could you see him? Give me the whole thing."

"What's the idea?" I said to Wilson. "You making an investigation?"

"Sure I'm making an investigation. There's got to be one. Do you want to help me, or would you rather wait a week or so until I get orders to go back to the ZI and Kettar assumes command?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Well, think of it on your own time, and stop wasting mine. Get on with your story."

I told it as completely and honestly as I could, from the time Mike and I left the camp until we got Dave loaded on the truck and started back for Massawa, and Crimmons took it all down.

When I finished, Wilson said, "Well, then, you couldn't actually see Harry when the shot was fired, could you? You don't know whether

it was a random shot let off accidentally or one that was aimed and deliberate?"

"It was an accident. Ask Dave. He'll tell you the same thing."

"Your opinion will count for something. So will his. But not for too much--you couldn't see Harry and Dave couldn't either, if he had his back turned as you say."

I started to say something but Wilson ignored me and told Crimmons to go get Harry.

Crimmons gave me his notes to read and I read them while he went for Harry. Harry hadn't shaved, hadn't washed, apparently hadn't done anything since we came in the night before but unlace his boots and take off his field jacket. He looked tired and scared.

"You look like hell, Lester," the Major said. "When we get through here, clean up and go get something to eat. Then go to bed."

"I can't sleep. I've been trying all night."

"Get some pills from Al. But first give us your story of what happened. Everything just as you remember it. Crimmons, reach that bottle out of the lower drawer on the right, will you?"

Crimmons got the bottle and began looking around for glasses.

"What in the hell you afraid of--leprosy? Give him a drink and then pass the damn bottle."

Harry took the bottle uncertainly and shook his head, but Wilson swore at him until he took a sip and then a good swallow. By the time the bottle made the rounds, some color had come into Harry's face and he sat down on the bed and told what he could remember of what happened.

He couldn't remember much. He and Dave had talked for a while, and then Harry decided to go hunting with me if I came back before dark.

He was loading the rifle when it went off; that was about it.

"Okay," Wilson said, "It's open and shut except for the quarrel you had with Wright on the morning you left. I can't see how we can ignore that. You might have drawn a little better crowd if you had held it in the post theater and sold tickets, but not much better, at that. As I understand it, you had been with that little twist who used to work in the dispensary--what's her name? Carla. Yeah. You'd been with her and she gave you the story that she was pregnant and that Wright had done it and then fired her. Is that right?"

Harry flushed deep red; he didn't care for Wilson's version of the thing, but he nodded. "As nearly as I can remember. I remember being mad as hell about it. I was going to come back to the post and have it out with Dave and she cried and begged me not to but finally I talked her into calling a taxi. After that I don't remember anything until we were camped on the river outside Massawa."

"Well, there's plenty of guys who can fill you in," Wilson said. "About half the post saw you trying to get at Wright and heard you threatening to kill him."

"I was drunk. I didn't know what I was doing. I don't even remember it."

"Did you believe Carla's story?"

"At the time. But I was drunk. I didn't know what I was doing."

"And you don't believe it now?"

"No! I know she was lying. I could see that when I sobered up and talked to Dave."

"Were you in love with the girl? Or did you think you were before you became convinced she was lying?"

"No! In love with her? Of course not! That's ridiculous."

"I don't think so. You must have had some reason for being mad enough to kill Wright. A man doesn't threaten to kill a good friend just to uphold the honor of a cabaret girl, no matter how drunk he is, does he? If you weren't in love with her, why did you get so upset over what you thought had happened to her?"

Harry shook his head slowly from side to side. "I can't explain it, Major, but I wasn't in love with her. I never thought I was. I just can't explain why I was so angry. I was drunk."

"Not good enough," Wilson said. "Just not good enough. Look-- I'm not asking you questions just to be a nosey bastard. Do you think I care whether you were in love with her or not? I'm asking what I think an investigating board will ask you if it comes to that. You went downtown, spent the night with the girl, swallowed her story about being pregnant, and came back here threatening to kill the man who was supposed to have done it to her. When you do that for a cabaret girl, and then later put a slug through the guy you threatened, you've got to explain why you threatened him."

Harry thought about that while the rest of us had a drink, then he said, "She wasn't a cabaret girl to me. To any of us. Mike and Al will tell you that. She was a kid we felt sorry for and tried to help, in a way. That's the way we saw her; I didn't even think of her as a woman. I don't think any of us did. When she left here and went to work in that place, I couldn't believe it. Dave told me that it was because she was in love with him and he didn't love her. That she did it out of spite--trying to make everybody on the post think he was a heel. That didn't make sense to me at the time, but I guess it does

now. She took me in; I fell for her story and I was naturally mad at Dave."

"Mad enough to kill him?"

"That was the liquor talking. I couldn't have hurt Dave, the shape I was in. You know that; you saw me in a fight in the club. Why, if it hadn't been for Al, I'd have been smeared all over the place. I don't need a reason to be nasty when I drink. I'm just a nasty drunk. What I said when I was drunk had nothing to do with what I did when I was sober. That's the best explanation I can give."

Wilson sat staring into space for a minute. The only sound in the room was the busy scratch of Crimmons' fountain pen. When that stopped, Wilson sat up a little in his chair and said to Crimmons, "Well, what's it look like to you? Give me a run-down--just the facts the way they look on paper--the way they will look to somebody reading the report."

Crim gave it, and I had to admit that it didn't look good: Dave got Carla a job in the office of the dispensary. She quit after a certain time and later convinced Harry--the third party and friend to them both--that Dave had gotten her pregnant and run her off. Harry threatened to kill Dave but in spite of the threat the two went hunting the same day. And Harry shot Dave.

When Crimmons finished, Wilson said, "Would you all agree that those are the main points?"

Mike and I nodded and Harry said, "I agree, but it makes me sound so damn guilty--why, if I heard that story about someone I didn't know, I'd bet a hundred to one that the shot was deliberate."

Nobody said anything, and after a minute Harry went on, low-

voiced but emphatic, "But it wasn't. I don't give a damn how it looks, I didn't shoot Dave on purpose. I wasn't even looking at him. I knew Al would be back before long, and I was loading the rifle. Generally I put four rounds in the magazine and then hold the top round while I close the action, leaving the chamber empty. Hell, I don't need a round in the chamber when I hunt; I can work that action fast enough if I see any game. So when I load up, I slide the action home on an empty chamber and snap the trigger to uncock the hammer."

"That's true," Mike said. "I've watched him do it hundreds of times."

"But that day I had five rounds left in a box. I didn't want to carry one loose round in my pocket, so I shoved it in the chamber."

He paused, and Wilson said, "Go on."

"Well, then, I closed the bolt and squeezed the trigger like I always do. Only that time the chamber wasn't empty. That's all there was to it. I don't expect you to believe me, but that's the way it was."

Wilson took another drink and stared at the bottle in his hand. I thought he chuckled but maybe it was the drink gurgling down. Then he started talking—at first I thought he was talking to the bottle, the way he stared at it, but then I realized for the first time that Harry was really on trial right then and there and that Wilson was doing the summing up.

He said: "It's the doctor who complicates things. Take the average guy, I could figure out what happened. With Wright, it's anybody's guess. Like when he first brought that girl here. I figured he was shackled up with her. That would be the natural thing,

wouldn't it?"

He shook the bottle; the liquor foamed a little but didn't answer him, so he went on.

"It was so obvious that Kettar thought we ought to do something about it. But when he tried to get some evidence, he couldn't do it. He finally decided that everything was on the up and up--and even convinced me. Not that I gave a damn, you understand. I'd have felt better if the doc had been playing house with her. Hell, I could've understood that--you know what I mean? But he wasn't, was he?"

He looked at me, so I said, no, I was pretty sure he wasn't.

"There you are. What's the next logical conclusion? Why, the doc's got marriage in mind--she's sweet and pure and he's keeping her that way until they make it legal. It happens oftener than a guy'd think. Hell, they went everywhere together."

"He didn't take her to Uangabo with us," Mike said.

Wilson ignored him. "And then she walked off the post and out of his life--at least that's the way it looked--and everybody on the post practically is saying how terrible it is and what a shame. Everybody except Wright, who doesn't appear to give a damn one way or the other. Now how am I going to work that into the report?"

Nobody replied. Wilson passed the bottle and everybody took a drink except Harry. When Crimmons handed the bottle back to Wilson, the Major twirled it and watched the liquor spin.

"On paper it's a clear-cut case and you're guilty as hell, Lester. But I don't think you're guilty of anything but stupidity. It's stupid to shoot somebody you don't want to shoot. Or maybe it's just unlucky; I couldn't say because I never shot anybody I didn't

intend to."

He stopped and thought about that for a moment; then he said abruptly to Crimmons, "If he's court-martialed, what'll they find?"

"Well, he fired the shot--nobody denies that. So a court's problem will be to decide whether it was deliberate or accidental. If they decide that it was deliberate, he'll get the works for attempted murder. But if Wright testifies that they had made up their differences before the shot was fired and that they were actually on good terms with each other, then a court will have to find that the shooting was accidental. They'll believe it was deliberate, probably, but there isn't a chance in the world of getting a guilty verdict past a review board if Wright himself says it was an accident. It all depends on Wright, I'd say."

"It all depends on Wright," Wilson repeated musingly. "The one guy you can't figure at all."

"You don't have to worry," I said. "He'll testify that it was an accident."

He looked at me, started to say something, and then changed his mind and swirled the liquor in the bottle instead. Finally he said briskly, "All right. When I get Wright's statement, if it fits in with the rest of them, I'll report that I have personally investigated the affair and find it to be an accident. Crimmons will have a statement for each of you to sign by tomorrow noon--and bear down hard on the fact that there wasn't any quarrel between Lester and Wright just before the shooting, will you, Crimmons? With any kind of luck, we'll have the report in and the whole thing officially closed before Kettar assumes command. Keep you mouths shut and if anybody

asks you about what happened, tell them that you can't say anything because the matter is still under investigation. That's all I have to say to you."

He shifted uncomfortably in the chair as though his back hurt. He looked tired and old and used up and I felt sorry as hell for him. I knew what he was doing for us when he could just as easily have let the whole thing slide until he was relieved of the command and sent back to the States. I wished there were some way I could thank him, but there wasn't and I knew that, too.

He said, "Anybody want another drink before you go? No? Well, I'll have one myself, if you don't mind."

Nobody minded and he was having one when we left.

CHAPTER XVII

When Wilson said that with any kind of luck we'd get the report in and the matter officially closed, he meant good luck, of course, but what we got was the other kind--all bad and lots of it.

It started the next day when Delucca told me that Dave was scheduled for more surgery that afternoon and that it might be several days before he could have any visitors.

"Would there be any way to get a short statement from him?" I asked. "Just a ten-minute interview, you know, so the report of the accident could be completed?"

"It can't be done. I'm not his surgeon, of course, but I can tell you that his surgeon will not approve of such a thing--not for several days. Even if it were possible, anything Doctor Wright might say would be fragmentary and partially incoherent. His pain will be extreme for some time and he will be heavily sedated. No, it's out of the question."

I wasn't satisfied that it was out of the question so I went with Mike down to see the doctor who was caring for Dave. He explained to Mike--and Mike to me, for the doctor spoke no English--that the internal bleeding was stopped and the damage to the organs repaired to some extent, but the spine had been damaged; how much remained to be seen but more surgery was needed when a certain amount of healing had taken place and when Dave was strong enough to stand it. The possibility existed that some permanent damage had been done.

Did that mean that Dave could be partially paralyzed?

It meant that, yes, but it was too early to tell, much too early. It might be weeks before the extent of the damage could be accurately assessed. He might recover completely or only partially but any recovery would take time.

And time was what we didn't have.

The doctor seemed relieved to have been able to report to somebody; he hadn't really known whom to report to. It would be appropriate, Mike told him, to notify me of Dave's progress until such time as we could get a medical officer on the post to replace Dave. I would assume the responsibility of keeping the necessary records.

Ah--one other thing, he told Mike. There was a young lady who had been making insistent inquiries. Was she to be given medical information about the patient's condition? "Tell him to send her to me," I said.

We didn't tell Harry how bad Dave was but of course we had to tell him that Dave couldn't make a statement for some time and that he might not be able to make one before Major Wilson got his orders and relinquished command. That news didn't upset Harry as much as it would have me if I'd been him. He couldn't see that it made much difference who made the investigation.

"Actually, I'd just as soon have it done thoroughly," he said, "so there won't be any questions about whether it was an accident."

There weren't any questions as far as Kettar was concerned, according to Crimmons; Kettar was pushing for a court-martial. Whatever else might be in doubt about the case, Harry had fired the shot, and Kettar reasoned that a court ought to decide just what Harry was

guilty of, but that he was guilty there could be no doubt.

I didn't tell Harry that, either, because both Crimmons and I thought there was still a good chance that we could get a statement from Dave in time to close the case before Kettar had any real say in the matter.

Carla held out all day Monday and most of Tuesday, but she came finally, on Tuesday afternoon. I saw her through the window of the waiting room as she came through the gate and met her at the door of the dispensary and took her to my room.

She wasn't crying but she looked as though she had been and might start again almost any time. There were hollows in her cheeks and circles under her eyes, dark and ugly against the impossibly pale skin. But she had made up her mind to be calm and business-like and she worked hard at it.

"I didn't want to come," she began. "I know how you feel about me. But I have to know about Dave. They won't tell me anything at the hospital. Al, how is he? How bad is it? Is he going to live? Is he in much pain?"

Once she was started, the questions came tumbling out. I told her as much as I knew about Dave in a general way, but took care to make it sound better than it really was. "He's going to live," I said. "That's the important thing, isn't it?"

"Why won't they let me see him? Is it that he doesn't want to talk to me, Al? Is that it? But I can't believe that. Even if he blames me for what happened it would be like him to see me. Does he hate me so much?"

"He doesn't hate you at all, Carla. That's nonsense. He

doesn't blame you for what happened, either; none of us do. It was an accident that would have happened even if Dave had never known you."

"It was no accident. Harry did it--and it was my fault. Oh my God--why did I do it? Why?"

She lost her composure and began to sob. I thought she might become hysterical and I silently cursed myself for telling the Italian doctor to send her to me.

"Nobody thinks it was your fault," I said.

But she wouldn't be comforted. "It was! Mine and Harry's."

"No," I said. "Carla, it wasn't like that at all. Harry wasn't even angry when he did it. Dave told him the truth and Harry believed him. Dave will tell you that when he's able."

She wanted to believe me but she couldn't.

"There'll be an investigation," I said. "There may even be a trial and if there is, they'll ask you to testify. They'll want to know what you told Harry and you'll have to tell them, Carla."

She thought about that and nodded, and I went on.

"They'll ask you what kind of mood Harry was in, too, when he left you. Some of the people asking the questions will be trying to show that Harry was angry enough to kill Dave."

"He was. I didn't even want him to leave when I saw how he was. I was afraid of what he might do."

"You called a cab for him."

"He told you that? Yes, it's true. He was very angry and very drunk. I was afraid of him."

"What did you have to be afraid of? He wasn't angry at you."

If you thought he'd hurt Dave, why did you let him come back to the post? You wouldn't have been afraid of him if he had been sober, would you?"

She set her lips in a way I didn't like and refused to say anything.

I kept trying. "Look, Carla, Harry might be court-martialed. They could kick him out of the service or even send him to jail. I'm telling you that he didn't shoot Dave because of what you told him. It was an accident. But even if you think it wasn't, you're more at fault than Harry is. You got him drunk and lied to him and got him all worked up until he came back here that morning and made a fool of himself."

I paused to let that sink in. Then I said, "It isn't your fault that Dave is lying up there in the hospital, but it is your fault that Harry is in trouble. You can take the credit for that; if you hadn't made a fool of him, this whole thing would have been passed off for the accident it was."

That made her angry; she forgot about her tears and her eyes flashed.

"I don't owe Harry anything. I don't owe any of you anything. There was a time when I thought I did, but not any more. You were good to Grandfather and me, good to visit us and bring us things; good to build up dreams, too---dreams Grandfather used to warn me about, only I didn't have sense enough to listen to him. I knew the dreams weren't for him, but I am a woman and I thought because I am a woman and Dave is a man, the dreams were for me. You think I made a fool of Harry? What a fool you all made of me!"

"We didn't mean to. None of us meant to make a fool of you-- Dave least of all."

She brushed that aside and smiled bitterly; she wasn't interested in motives.

"What dreams they were, Al! Can you imagine them? A house in a city. A home for me to take care of, with trees and lawns and flowers. A car. Things to do, places to go, people to see--not half-starved Wogs and dirty Italian farmers but nice people, clean people with fine clothes. And Dave--always Dave, smiling and helping me live in that dream. When Grandfather died and I went to work here, I knew the dream was true. I knew it! Oh, Al . . ."

She began to sob again, burying her face in her hands. I pitied her and wanted to comfort her, but there was nothing I could say, nothing I could do. So I sat there and watched her go through the whole series of emotions that accompany disillusionment, knowing that she had been through them again and again, and knowing where they would end, too, and feeling sorry for her and helpless--first the disbelief, bewilderment, and self-pity, then the sharp disappointment and frustration, and finally embarrassment and humiliation and the burning anger that comes of wounded vanity.

And when she reached the last stage she stopped crying, blotted her tears, and said so coldly that even though I expected it, it startled me, "If Dave wants anything of me, let him ask for it. I'll testify any way he wants, but he will have to tell me himself what he wants."

"It isn't Dave who needs your testimony," I protested. "It's Harry. Harry's never done anything to you--why take it out on him?"

He wouldn't even be in this mess if he hadn't believed that nonsense you told him."

"Let Dave ask me," she insisted stubbornly.

"He can't. Not in time to help Harry. And suppose he never is able to? I don't want to frighten you, but Dave could die. I don't think he will, but if he does, your testimony will be more valuable than ever to Harry."

"If Dave dies," she said slowly, "then I hope they send Harry to prison. All his life. I hope they do. He is a fool and ought to suffer. Suffering is the price you pay for being a fool. I don't know much, but I know that well enough."

She left almost as apprehensive as she had been when she came but now with a purpose--to see that Harry paid for being a fool. If I'd been working against him, I couldn't have done him more damage. He's an unlucky son of a bitch with women, I thought. With women and liquor. He ought to leave them alone. His trouble is that he can't see either of them for what they are. Then I thought, hell, nobody else can, either. My luck wasn't exactly spectacular in that line.

Maybe bad luck is just another name for stupidity. Anyway, when you get a little bad luck, lots of times you go to doing stupid things that only make it worse; it's a hell of a strong character who won't draw to a couple of inside straights along toward morning when he's been taking a beating from the pasteboards all night.

Dave wasn't any better by the end of the week. Wilson couldn't get to him so he kept the pressure on me to get a statement from him and there wasn't a thing I could do. When Mike called Friday morning to tell me that the movement orders for us had come in, I was ready to

try anything. I told Mike that if he could hold the orders until the next day, I could get the statement from Dave, and Wilson would be able to file the report before he had to relinquish command. Mike promised to fix the tape so that it couldn't be deciphered and the message would have to be serviced when the next schedule with the transmitting station was kept the following morning.

What I did was type up a statement that would clear Harry, a statement telling how Dave and Harry had talked over what Carla said and agreed that it was a lie. I mentioned that they sat around joking about how Harry was so easily taken in when he'd been drinking and how he didn't even remember most of what had happened between him and Dave that morning.

When I had the statement ready, I put it in a large manila folder, the kind they use around hospitals for x-rays, slipped some x-rays in with it, and drove down to the Regina.

It was still early and the receptionist at the desk looked like she could have used another hour of sleep. I waved the envelope vaguely in the direction of the surgical ward and smiled at her, and she smiled back sleepily and nodded.

The operating room at the Regina is at the end of a corridor on the first floor. The rooms along each side of the corridor are generally assigned to post-operative patients and I figured I'd find Dave in one of them. As I made my way slowly along the corridor checking each room, I passed an aide who didn't give me a second glance and a nurse who did; she eyed me questioningly and I turned on the smile again and waved the envelope. It worked, but I had to keep walking as though I knew where I was going until she went into one of the rooms

along the corridor.

Keeping my eye on the room the nurse had gone into, I searched until I found Dave's room, slipped inside, and closed the door. At first I thought he was asleep because he didn't turn his head when I came in, but when I stood by the bed I saw that his eyes were open. When he saw who it was, he turned his head about an inch in my direction and a crooked, distorted little smile wrinkled the corners of his mouth.

When he spoke, it was with great effort, and then he scarcely raised his voice above a whisper. At first I had the crazy idea that he knew I wasn't supposed to be there and was trying to keep his voice down so we wouldn't be heard; suddenly it came to me that he couldn't speak any louder.

I asked how he was doing and a couple of other stupid questions and he answered in monosyllables, his voice hoarse and low-pitched and halting.

"Look, Dave," I said, "I'm not supposed to be here. You probably know that. But I've got to get a statement from you. If I don't get it this morning, Kettar is probably going to railroad Harry into a court-martial. I've got the thing all typed up but I probably don't have time to read it to you. What it says is that you and Harry were on good terms at the time of the shooting and that he had no grudge against you and no reason to shoot you. That the whole thing was an accident. Would you sign that?"

"I can't," he whispered. "Arms--hands--won't move. Look." He wiggled a couple of fingers on his right hand and moved the arm sideways half an inch or so. "That's it--right there--all of it."

I stared in horror. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead and upper lip from the effort of moving his fingers.

"Dave, look, I can get some witnesses," I said desperately. "I can read you the statement and you can agree to it. How would that be? We can witness your agreement. Okay? But it's got to be done this morning."

The twisted smile seemed to have hardened on his lips and his eyes looked past me to things I couldn't see. I might not have been there for all the response I got, but I had to try.

"You'll get better," I told him. "I know you will. A little more surgery--some physical therapy. I'll try to stick around. Maybe I can work it--at least until you're well enough to go back to the States. A couple, three, years, we'll do another hitch here. We'll hunt Uangabo together yet."

He responded to that; his eyes came back from wherever they'd been and fastened on my face. "I'm tired. Let Harry make the statement. Let Carla."

"It wasn't Harry's fault. Dave, it wasn't! Honest to God, it was an accident. He didn't do it because of Carla or because of anything. Jesus, Dave, you know that! You know it, don't you?"

"Go away. Leave me alone. Get out."

He was still talking when the nurse opened the door. I beat it with my bogus x-rays, a torrent of angry Italian ringing in the corridor behind me.

And then I did a really stupid thing. I went back to the post and got out a bunch of records Dave had signed, practiced writing his signature for half an hour, and finally forged it on the statement.

I knew it was stupid, but I told myself, what the hell--Dave's out of his mind with pain. And after what happened to him, he's naturally bitter. It'll wear off when he gets better--even if it doesn't, he'll never deny that statement. He'll know who made it. He may still hate Harry, but he can't hate me. And he might die. He could die.

You know how it goes--you sit there all night backing kings against aces or running pairs into three of a kind, and pretty soon you get the seven and the eight and the ten and the jack, and you figure hell, I can draw a nine; the damn deck owes me that much.

Never bet on it.

That afternoon Crimmons added Dave's statement to the others, the Major read the whole lot, and they filed a report by teletype to the effect that after investigating the circumstances surrounding the shooting and especially upon consideration of the statement of the victim, the commanding officer found the incident to be a regrettable accident. To prevent future occurrences of like incidents, the commanding officer was initiating a five-point safety program in the use of sporting rifles, etc., etc.

The following day--Saturday--our shipping orders came through and Wilson relinquished command of the post to Kettar. Sunday afternoon Mike and I lounged around the dispensary and talked over old times on the post and how we were going to miss the place. We made a few plans for keeping in touch when we got back to the States and we got a little mellow sipping scotch and reminiscing about this man and that one who had come and gone while we had been there. In a way it was a celebration, not hilarious because of Dave, but quietly triumphant because we thought we were at least leaving things as straight

as we could.

After supper Harry came up to the dispensary with us and some of our mood rubbed off on him. He didn't drink, but he sat and listened to our stories and seemed more relaxed than he had been since the accident. Of course, he didn't know how bad Dave really was, and I didn't see any point in telling him just then. He'd have to know sooner or later, but not right then. Dave might improve considerably before Harry got a chance to see him; at the time I was optimistically inclined to think that Dave would improve.

There was a bright, early moon that evening. When it was well up over the headquarters building the three of us went out and sat on the steps of the dispensary and talked. It was just cool enough to be uncomfortable if there had been a breeze, but there wasn't; not even the restless leaves at the top of the big eucalyptus stirred. It was quiet, too. We could hear the shouts of the men playing basketball on the court down behind the PX, and the occasional squawk of a taxi horn from the traffic on the airport road but even these sounds were curiously muted, as though the night were pressing in on them and shutting down the sound as it shut off the light.

Crimmons came up through the dark from the direction of the headquarters building; when he came into the glow of the little fire-light that burned above the dispensary door I recognized him and offered him a drink.

"Celebrating, are you?"

"No, just having a couple of quiet ones before we go to bed. Have one--you look thirsty."

"I've been doing thirsty work. I've been helping our new post

commander."

He helped himself to a drink from the bottle, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and belched loudly; that wasn't the first drink he'd had that evening.

"Ivan the Fox," he said. "That's what the troops call old Kettar. Did you know that? What I've been helping Ivan the Fox do is, I've been writing a report for him. To the Chief Signal Officer. We sent a report to the Chief Signal Officer yesterday, too, didn't we? Now when he opens his office Monday, he'll have another report."

Crimmons like to be cute when he had something to say; he was always that way, and there was no use pushing him because he'd get it out sooner if you didn't. I offered him another drink.

"Not right now, Al. I want to get all this straight before I have any more. Don't you want to hear about this report?" He looked at us in the semi-darkness, wide-eyed and owlishly. "What it says mainly is to disregard the other report. Because one of the statements that the other report was based on was forged. Now, how about that? Yessir--one of 'em was bogus. So what we're going to do, we're going to convene a board of officers to open an investigation into the whole matter. Oh, we'll get to the bottom of it. Ivan the Fox is on the trail."

"Forged!" Harry said. "How could anybody forge a statement? Who would do it? And why? Which one was it?"

"The one that had Dave Wright's name on it. As for how it was done and why, maybe Al can tell you. I suppose what you do when you forge a statement is just write it up and sign somebody else's name to it. How about that, Al?"

I said, "What makes Kettar think that signature is forged? What is he--a handwriting expert? Hell, he can't prove that it's forged. Dave's a sick man--naturally his signature is a little shakey. If Kettar thinks that signature is a forgery, let him prove it."

Crim snorted. He dropped his cuteness and became all business. "Hell, Al, he already has proved it. He called the hospital and found out that Dave Wright hasn't even been permitted to have a visitor since the accident."

"The hell he hasn't. I visited him. I sneaked in and read the statement to him. I can prove it--one of the nurses caught me and put me out."

"You're whistling in the dark, old boy," Crim said. "Kettar knows all about that. He also knows that Dave Wright couldn't sign his name if his life depended on it. If pencils were a million to the pound, Wright couldn't lift one that first inch. The doctors know it, you know it, now Ivan the Fox knows it. I like that name--Ivan the Fox. Gimme another drink."

Harry stared open-mouthed at me. "Why can't he sign his name? He's worse than you admitted, isn't he? He's unconscious--dying . . ."

"Take it easy, will you! He's conscious and he isn't dying. I tell you I talked to him."

"Lies! Why can't he sign his name? What are you keeping from me? Damn you, Al! You haven't any right to keep anything from me!"

He was half up from his seat and I thought he was going to start swinging any moment.

"All right!" I shouted back at him. "You're right. I haven't

any right to keep anything from you. And I won't. Dave is paralyzed. Almost completely."

"Paralyzed." He whispered the word as though he were afraid to say it aloud.

"He can move his head a little and the fingers on his right hand maybe an inch. He can talk, too, but just barely."

"That's what you didn't want to tell me--"

"Nobody told me. I found it out myself when I sneaked up there to get that statement signed. Honest to God, Harry, I didn't know it myself until yesterday. When the doctor talked to us, he said that was in critical condition but that he was improving. He didn't tell us that Dave couldn't move a muscle, did he, Mike?"

I looked at Mike and suddenly I remembered that Mike had translated everything the doctor said. What I knew about Dave I had learned from Mike, not from the doctor. I looked hard at Mike, but his face was expressionless.

"What a pack of fools we are!" I said. "Whatever happens to Dave, he's got to live with it. So have we all. You lied to me about what the doctor said, didn't you, Mike?"

Mike Clementi wasn't used to being called a liar; even in the dim light I thought his swarthy face grew darker and he frowned but his voice was soft when he spoke. "Let's say I emphasized the optimistic side of what the doctor said. He told me that Dave had recovered some use of certain muscles and that he would continue to improve--up to a certain point, at least. How much he can recover is something that even the doctor wouldn't guess about."

Harry nodded. "And Al emphasized the optimistic side to me--

if that's what you want to call it. Only by the time I got the story, there wasn't enough truth in it to make it worth the telling. You're right, Al; we've all done too much lying."

"You haven't lied to anybody, Harry," Mike said in that same soft voice.

"Nobody but myself," Harry replied slowly, "but in the long run, that may be the worst kind of lie of all."

We sat there in the shambles of our beautiful evening, silent and isolated from each other by the thoughts that crowded in on each of us. Crimmons broke the silence with a long gurgling drink from the bottle.

"Well," he said, "what I came here for was to give you some advice, Al. You and Harry both. I don't owe you anything, not after the spot you put me and Wilson in, but if you want to listen, there's a couple of things I can tell you."

"You don't owe me anything. But go ahead; I'm listening."

"Kettar's going to court-martial you. He's already got the charge sheet drawn up: falsifying an official document. And he's been gathering evidence all afternoon."

"What'll I get?"

"On that charge you could get ten years. But he can't get that much mileage out of you; not even close to it. The review board would throw it out. He'll try to give you six months and reduction to the lowest pay grade, and fine you two thirds of your pay for six months."

"He can't do that," Harry protested. "Why, Kettar can't even sit on the court. He won't have anything to say about what penalty is assessed. That will be up to the court."

"Don't be silly, Lieutenant. Kettar appoints the court. He reviews their decision. He also approves their annual efficiency reports and submits their names for promotion when the time comes. Whatever Al gets will be whatever Kettar wants to give him--actually, whatever Kettar thinks he can get by a review board."

"You said you had some advice," I said.

"Yeah. Don't fight him. Don't accept counsel. Plead your own case and plead guilty. Admit you signed the statement, but get it on the record that you read the statement to Wright and Wright approved it but couldn't sign is so he asked you to sign it for him. Say you didn't know it was wrong--you thought it would be all right as long as that was what Wright wanted."

"Will anybody believe that?"

"Kettar already believes it. He knows Wright well enough to know that Wright will back any story you tell."

I wasn't sure of that but I didn't comment on it. Once they tried me and found me guilty, they wouldn't try me again for the same thing, no matter what Dave decided to say when he was well enough to testify. If Kettar wanted to railroad the thing through, my play was to go along with him. And I thought Crim was probably right; he was no lawyer but he knew as much about military courts as anybody I knew. If I entered a guilty plea, I wouldn't get much.

"What about me?" Harry said. "Don't tell me I'm going to be left out--after all, I'm the only one who's really done anything wrong."

Crimmons grinned in the dim light. "Looks like you might luck out, Lieutenant. After all, Al's guilty of a crime and Kettar can prove it, but he can't prove that you're guilty of anything but care-

lessness. At least, as long as Dave's alive. If he should die, then you'd be in real trouble. Kettar has plenty of witnesses here on post who heard you threaten Wright, and he has Carla lined up and ready to state that you said you'd kill Wright when you left her apartment that night."

Harry started at that. "Carla! Why, she knows I was drunk-- I didn't know what I was saying. She knows that."

"Yeah? Well, that's not her story. She told Kettar this afternoon that she was afraid you meant it. She's ready to swear that from what you said that morning, you probably shot Dave deliberately."

Mike mumbled something I didn't catch. Crimmons helped himself to another drink from the bottle, slapped the cork home with the palm of his hand, and stood up to go.

"But you aren't really in bad shape, Lieutenant. Kettar can't get anywhere trying you for deliberate intent without getting Wright's testimony; if he waits to get that, he probably won't have a case. About all he can do is give you a reprimand for carelessness. With Carla's testimony, the case will always be in question, of course. It will follow you wherever you go--maybe hold up your promotion to captain. But what the hell--you aren't in bad shape, really."

"Oh, I'm in great shape. I can see that."

Crimmons took that at face value. He stretched, yawned, and said, "What Kettar will do, of course, is put a lot of pressure on you. Insinuate some pretty nasty things about you and Dave and Carla, try to plant the idea of jealousy as a motive for the shooting. He'll try to stampede you into admitting that you wanted to shoot Wright, whether the actual shooting was an accident or not. But as long as you stick

to your story and don't lose your head, he can't really prove anything. You'll be all right. Al's the one who's in trouble."

The moon was dead overhead by that time; Crimmons barely cast a shadow as he walked down the street toward the club.

Harry said, "I'm in great shape. You're losing your stripes, maybe going to jail, just because I got careless for an instant with a rifle. There ought to be some way to fix it. It isn't fair." He said it softly into the night. He wasn't complaining, just stating a fact. I pitied him.

"Forget it. Don't let it bother you. If I do what Crim said, I won't get any guardhouse time. I don't mind losing the stripes. Hell, I'll have them back in a few years. Time heals all wounds--didn't you ever hear that?--and I got plenty of time."

"And there's Dave," Harry said, as though the idea had just struck him. "Paralyzed. I did that to him. Am I supposed to forget that, too? How many years before time heals that wound?" His voice had been rising, but he paused suddenly and said very quietly, "How long is a year when you're flat on your back and can't move a muscle?"

"He won't be that way all his life," Mike said. "He's got feeling in his arms and upper torso. The doctor was sure he'd be able to sit up eventually and to move his arms and hands."

"What about his legs?" I asked.

"Not much chance," Mike admitted. "He'll probably be in a wheel chair."

He was silent for a moment, staring across at the white wall of the hospital as though he could see something written there he couldn't quite make out.

Then he went on, "I should have told you. But it wasn't put very clearly to me, really. There were ifs in it--lots of ifs, it seemed to me. I kept think that the doctor might be wrong, that maybe once Dave got back to the States the picture might be different--they know more there, their equipment is better. The reality was there, but it was cloudy with things I wanted to see, things that might be real--can you understand that?--and I picked the might-be and passed in on to you for the real. If I deceived you, I deceived myself, too. And maybe you're right, Harry, when you say that is the worst kind of lie."

He paused and stared hard at the white wall and frowned. I passed the bottle to him and he held it without drinking while he continued to talk.

"It's the worst kind of deception, because somebody always pays for it. You asked me to garble that tape, Al, and I knew what you had in mind; I knew it for a certainty. I knew you'd be caught, too. And yet, you know, I kept thinking that there was something I didn't know, something that you could do that would somehow make everything all right again. Because that's what I wanted to believe. If I hadn't garbled that tape, you wouldn't be in trouble."

"Oh, that's damned odd reasoning, blaming yourself for something I did. I knew what I was doing. I had a hell of a good chance of pulling it off, too, if it hadn't been for Kettar."

Harry laughed shortly. "Mike's absolutely right, you know, Al, and you're dead wrong. It's the ifs--if Kettar were different, if Carla hadn't lied, if I hadn't been fool enough to believe her. Or you can go back even farther--if Carla had seen that she'd no chance

at all of tying Dave down in the States, if we'd all seen that. Or if Dave were different; if he'd fallen for her like almost anybody else would have. From front to back, every damn one of us has seen what he wanted to see and shut his eyes to what was really there. If Kettar was anybody but Kettar, you say; but he isn't. Hell, you knew that, Al, and yet you tried to get that forgery by him."

"I didn't try to get it by Kettar. I didn't know that he'd have anything to do with it. Hell, I didn't even think of forging the thing when I went down there. You knew how bad Dave was, Mike, but I didn't; I thought he'd be able to sign his name."

"But when you found out he couldn't, wouldn't it have been better to wait until he could, even if it meant that Kettar would be post commander? Unless you think Dave might die. That's it, isn't it, Al? You don't think he's going to make it! You're still lying to me!"

"Calm down, Harry. I don't think he's going to die. He's getting better every day. Take it easy."

But Harry wouldn't be calmed; he kept insisting that if I hadn't thought Dave was dying, I wouldn't have tried the forgery and there wasn't anything I could say to change his mind except the truth.

"Dave wouldn't consent to the statement. He's sick as hell, Harry, and in a lot of pain. A wound like that does funny things to a man's mind. And he's so heavily sedated that I doubt whether he knows half the time what's he saying. But I got to thinking that if Kettar got to him and started asking questions, Dave might say almost anything; hell, he's bitter about what happened--anybody would be-- and it'll be a long time, probably, before he can be objective enough

about it to care what happens to you, or to any of us."

"Even Dave," Harry murmured. "Even Dave. Well, I guess I've known it was that way. That's why the doctor wouldn't let any of us see him, isn't it? He didn't want to see us."

"I don't know--that might have been part of it," I admitted.

The bus with the midnight shift for the station ground past us and out the main gate. The driver waved as he went by; I thought it was Nick Costa, but I couldn't be sure. Nobody else seemed to notice us.

"Shooting Dave--that was a real thing," Harry went on. "Maybe in some ways accidents are the only real things that ever happen to us. And everybody misinterpreted it, even Dave. The idea that I would deliberately shoot Dave is completely unreal. Shooting him accidentally was improbable, but shooting him deliberately, hell, that's impossible--for me."

I passed the bottle but he waved it away. Mike took a drink and I had one, noticing as I tilted my head back that the moon was far down; its light was off the ground entirely but it still flashed silver off the tops of the useless antenna towers. I took a big swallow. The scotch burned and felt good at the same time; I realized I was cold.

"We'd better go in," I said. "I'm freezing. You'll catch your death of cold in that T-shirt, Harry."

"Don't worry. I won't die of a cold. But I guess it is bed-time."

They both got up to go. "Don't worry about things, Al," Harry said. "Don't lose any sleep over Kettar."

"Me? How about you? You been sleeping any at all? I can give you some pills if you want them."

"I won't need them tonight, Al. Thanks anyway."

"Well, if you do, let me know. You can't go forever without sleep."

"I've got something in my room to make me sleep. Sometimes I feel like I'd been sleeping all my life."

In spite of what I told Harry, I couldn't sleep that night. I dozed a little but the least noise jarred me awake. I heard the bus come in the gate with the off-duty shift from the station, and the men getting off at the mess hall, laughing and talking and horsing around. Things were quiet again, and then I thought I heard somebody walk up the road and climb the steps to the dispensary. I listened intently but nobody opened the screen door to the hallway so I decided I'd been mistaken.

I couldn't sleep, though; I was wide awake when the shot came and I heard it clearly. At first I thought it was some joker off the evening shift letting off a firecracker. The guys did that now and then--lit the things and pitched them into the mess hall or into somebody's room. That's one way to get your kicks at two in the morning, I guess.

But then I heard some shouts and confusion down by the officer billets and from the tone of it I could tell that it hadn't been a firecracker I'd heard. In a flash everything Harry had said that evening became clear to me; what he had done was clear, too--as clear as if he'd stood by the foot of my bed to do it.

I slipped into some clothes and shoes and started down there.

In the hallway of the dispensary was an envelope that had been slipped under the screen door. It was sealed and there was no name on it but I knew it was for me. I took time to go back to my room and put it on my desk. I could just as well have taken time to read it because I knew there wasn't any hurry, but I didn't feel like reading it just then.

People were milling around in the hallway of the BOQ but somebody had taken over and was keeping people out of the room, so I didn't try to go in. Wilson and Crimmons came out of the room and through the bunch of people in the hallway. Wilson brushed by me with a nod. Crimmons said, "He used that little 250/3000. Put the barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger."

"Did he leave a note?"

"Did he need to?"

They went on down the hallway and out the door toward the club.

CHAPTER XVIII

Harry's note read:

Al:

Please do not think of what I am going to do as suicide-- that is a word which refers to the self-destruction of crazed, desperate, demented people and I am none of these. I know what I am doing; I have never undertaken anything with greater certainty.

I am making an entry to balance the books and set the records straight. In reality, of course, my death shouldn't change anything, but it will, because of the unreal interpretations people will put on it.

The most important misinterpretation will be Kettar's; he will see what I am doing as a confession of guilt and a successful attempt to escape punishment and so will have no reason to carry his investigation of the accident any farther. I think he will drop the matter of the forged statement, too, but in case he doesn't I have left a note confessing to the forgery (enclosed). Use it if you have to--it's part of the entry to set the records straight. But I don't think you'll ever need it.

There will be other misinterpretations, too; everybody concerned will shape the reality to fit his own dream. But I'm writing this to you so that at least one person will know that what I'm doing is nothing more than a single, real, decisive

act, as a consequence of which I expect a number of irregularities to be put straight.

That was all of it. No signature, no date, no kind of goodby. The confession he mentioned was folded inside the note; it was addressed to the commanding officer and carefully dated and signed.

The note was neatly written in Harry's fine, straight handwriting. There wasn't a single mistake or mark-out in it. I wondered idly as I re-read it if he had made any preliminary drafts of it and whether he had burned them. I couldn't have stopped him, I thought. Even if I'd gotten up when I heard him walk up the street and come to the door, I couldn't have stopped him. If he was set on balancing the books, there wasn't anything I or anybody else could have done about it.

And the books began to balance in the way Harry had forseen. Kettar called me in and lectured me about dishonesty and immorality and loose living and when I had enough, I said, "Are you charging me with a crime, Major?"

He was taken aback. "Well, no, Sergeant. I think, after the turn events have taken, that you can see well enough the consequences of deception and dishonesty. But I hope all this will be a lesson to you. I hope that just because I'm letting you off this time, you . . ."

"You aren't letting me off of anything, Sir. If you believe that I forged that statement, then try me. I wish you would, because I can prove that I didn't do it. But until you do try me, just quit talking and acting as though I were guilty."

"You can prove you didn't do it?" His eyes narrowed in thought and I could see that the nickname "Fox" was right for him. "Lester

left a note, didn't he? Yes, that must be it. Give it to me-- immediately. It's official evidence, of course. Is it here or in your room?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Sir. I didn't say anything about a note."

He blustered and bluffed and threatened but in the end he had to give up without accomplishing anything. I hadn't accomplished anything, either, because he would have let me go in any event; I'd have gotten out of his office an hour sooner if I'd kept my mouth shut, but it was a very satisfying hour, at that.

Kettar did what he could by way of revenge, though, one of the things he did being to restrict me to the post. I wanted to see Dave but I knew that Kettar was watching me like a hawk, hoping I'd break restriction, so I thought I'd wait a couple of days until he'd relaxed a little and then take my chances over the wall behind the motor pool.

But the other thing Kettar did was appoint me escort for Harry's body on the trip back to the States, so that before I got a chance to slip out and talk to Dave, I was aboard the special plane they sent from Dhahran to move the body. They flew us to Frankfort and from there we got a fast commercial plane to New York. I hardly had time to get my gear together, let alone say goodbye to anybody, before we were on the plane and headed out.

I shouldn't say "we"; the iced-down thing in the box in the back of the plane wasn't Harry. Not to me, it wasn't. As we cleared the plateau and set a course north and a little west out over Cheren and Agordat, I could see the dark green gash of the palm growth along the Barca river and I had the feeling that Harry might be down there

among the cool palms of the Barca.

I thought I'd like to remember that country as I could see it from the air that morning and I wanted to get the names of the places straight so I went forward and asked the navigator the name of a little village we were flying over. He couldn't find it on his map but that didn't surprise him, he said, because the maps didn't show half the villages scattered around over East Africa.

"You're looking along the wrong river," I said, following his finger on the map. "That's the Barca down there."

He laughed and said, "Come on, now, Sarge--I may get lost now and then, but I'm not that bad. That's the Setit we're over now. The Barca is miles over east; can't even see it from here through all the heat haze. Look, you can see a little water in the river down there. The Barca's dry as a bone this time of the year."

I looked and he was right. I grinned and said that everything looked different from the air and went back to my seat, feeling foolish. If Harry's down there somewhere, I thought, then he's haunting the wrong river and the hell with it. Pretty soon we were out toward Khartoum and over country I didn't know anyway, so I quit looking and went to sleep.

An official escort from Graves Registration met the plane in New York and took the body home so I didn't have to meet Harry's wife and his mother. I didn't know whether they would figure that the books had been balanced or not, but from what I knew of the wife, I thought she might feel they had.

Nearly a year passed before I saw Dave again. He was in a rehabilitation center in Massachusetts. He got my address at Walter

Reed somehow and wrote asking me to come see him.

So I went. He was in a wheel chair on the sun porch of the ward with a bunch of other men in wheel chairs. It was not yet noon and very cool in the shade of the porch and they were in pajamas and robes with blankets over their laps, all except Dave, who was dressed neatly in clean starched khakis.

There was a drawing board attached to the arms of Dave's chair. The arms had been extended and the board was held to them with C-clamps; Dave had made friends with somebody in the utility and repair section. A map was tacked to the board and on top of the map were several books. Dave was leaning across the map talking earnestly to several of the other men.

We shook hands across the drawing board. He was grinning broadly and very glad to see me, and when I saw the grin I was glad I had come.

"You look great," he said. "Just great, Al."

"You look good, too. Picking up a little weight, though."

"Don't get enough exercise. I've got myself on a reducing diet now. You should have seen me a couple of months ago. I've got to lose a few more pounds before they operate."

"They still cutting on you?"

He laughed. "Reluctantly. There's an outside chance that I can get out of this chair and onto crutches. It's an awfully long shot but I've talked them into doing it."

"You would."

He laughed again. "How'd you come down, Al?"

"Drove. I bought a car after I got back to the States."

"Great. Spring me from this joint and I'll buy you lunch."

I got a folding wheel chair and helped him into it. We went to a good restaurant and he ordered and we made small talk while we waited for the food, and then he said, "I'm glad you came, Al. I wasn't sure you would, after what I did to Harry."

I tried to protest but he went on before I could get the words out.

"Don't try to pretend that it isn't true. You know how it was as well as I do. I didn't agree to that statement you wrote up, and because I didn't, Harry shot himself. It's as simple as that, any way you want to look at it."

"It isn't true. That wasn't the way it was at all."

"No? They why did Harry shoot himself?"

I hesitated, trying to think what to say. "He thought--well--that it was the simplest way of--of clearing things up, you know." That sounded silly, I knew, but I couldn't think of any other way of saying it. "Anyway, he knew you weren't yourself, and that when you were feeling better, you'd realize that he shot you by accident. And I saw what kind of shape you were in. Hell, I knew you didn't know what you were doing when you refused to agree to that statement. I certainly didn't hold it against you. I never have. I knew you would clear Harry when you were better and able to realize what you were doing."

"Maybe you did, but Harry didn't. He didn't have any other reason for doing what he did. I was his only hope and he didn't think he could count on me." He shook his head slowly from side to side. "I'm not sure he wasn't right, you know. I wasn't getting any better; I didn't seem to be able to want to get any better. I wasn't

certain Harry hadn't shot me on purpose. I'm convinced now that he didn't, but then--well, until I learned that he had killed himself, I wasn't sure. All I really felt was the enormity of the thing that had happened to me--everything else seemed unimportant and insignificant. I don't know how to explain it--I just didn't care what happened to Harry or to anybody else. I was lying there, completely out of it, so it seemed to me, and I didn't want to be bothered with anybody or anything. Nothing in the whole world mattered to me except what had happened to me. And I kept thinking, to hell with them all--let them take care of themselves."

"I think I can understand something of what you felt. But I believe you'd have come out of it. I'm sure you would have."

He looked at me a long moment. "I don't know, Al. I wasn't making any progress at all. Then Mike told me what Harry had done--that was after you were gone--and I thought about that and began to see that things mattered to other people, too. It came to me all at once that no matter how badly the whole business affected me, it had been even worse for Harry. So bad for him that he couldn't live with it. I had something left--a little bit--and he hadn't a thing; he'd run his string out completely. I began to get better from the moment I realized that and I haven't felt sorry for myself since. I owe that much to Harry."

I said, "So the books do balance."

"What do you mean?"

"Just a manner of speaking," I said. "Have you heard anything about Carla? Any idea what happened to her?"

"She came to see me several times before I left Asmara. She

blamed herself for what happened to Harry, though of course she wasn't to blame at all except in a remote way." He grinned. "I used her sense of guilt, though. I couldn't convince her that Harry's death wasn't her fault, so I convinced her that the least she could do was get out of the cabaret and lead a different life. Harry would want it that way, I told her."

"She did it?"

"When I left, she was back at the Regina working as a student nurse. But I doubt that she ever graduates because the new finance officer, a fellow straight out of the finance school and not much older than she is, was giving her a real rush."

After we ate I thought we might take a drive or something but he said he wanted to show me something back at the hospital so I took him there.

When we got to his ward he got the drawing board with the map on it and put it across his bed. He was as excited as a father showing his kid how a new toy works. "Look here," he said, jabbing at the map. "How would you like to be there?"

It was a map of East Africa, and his finger was resting on Ethiopia at a spot maybe a hundred miles inland from the straits of Bab-el-mandib.

"Oil," he said. "All along the coastal salt marshes and inland in the major depressions. Everybody knows it's there, but nobody's been able to get it out because of the climate and the diseases. But an American oil company has just gotten a lease to develop it and I think I've got the job of doing on the spot research on the diseases in the area and formulating plans for sanitation and disease prevention."

There was a rising note of enthusiasm in his voice. I said, "Do you think you can handle it?"

"Sure I can. I'm having a little trouble selling the oil company on it, but they'll come around. For one thing, they can't get anybody else who's qualified, even at the price they're willing to pay, and for another, I've got Delucca backing me, and he's the best known authority on diseases in that area."

I didn't say anything; I pretended to be studying the map. He said, "It's the wildest, most remote kind of country you can imagine. Why, there aren't even any good maps of the place. The oil company's got men there now, trying to map and explore parts of it."

I said, "Sounds great. It's a real break for you. I sure hope it works out."

"Oh, it will work out; things always do. The main reason I got you here was to tell you about it and to ask you if you'd go with me. They'll have to hire some lab and research assistants and I know I can get you on. Fantastic pay--four or five times what you're making now."

"Me? How can I go? They'll discharge you as soon as they're finished with you here, but I'm still in the regular army. I've only got about two years done on this hitch--four more to go."

"We can beat that. I've been studying the regulations for the past week. Here's what you do--change your six-year enlistment over to indefinite. You can do that any time you want. Then when I'm ready to go, just resign and go with me. I know it will work."

He was right. He had it all worked out and he was absolutely right. I thought he was probably right about the job with the oil

company, too; he'd not only get it, but he'd take me along if I'd go. I laughed and he looked at me curiously.

"What's the matter? Don't you believe me? I'm serious. This isn't something I've dreamed up to pass the time while I'm here the way some of these guys do. I've practically got that job and I need you. What are you laughing at? I was never more serious in my life."

"I know you are, Dave. I was just laughing because you're so much like your old self. Everything you've said sounds so much like a pipe dream that I wouldn't believe any of it if I didn't know you. You've come a long way since I saw you in the hospital in Asmara."

"I've got a long way to go."

"You'll make it. But you don't need me."

I didn't convince him. We loafed around the hospital that afternoon and went to a movie and to the club in the evening, and he kept the pressure on.

"Let me think about it for a few weeks," I told him the next morning as I was leaving. "There's no big rush. I'll call you or come up and see you when I've made up my mind."

Three weeks went by and I didn't call. Every day I expected a call from him, and I was in my office in the Registrar Section one afternoon when the call came.

"I definitely have the job," he said. "Have you made up your mind? Are you going with me?"

"Yes and no, respectively," I said.

I could imagine him grinning confidently at the other end of the line as he made his pitch. He was paying for the call so I didn't

stop him.

As I listened, I pushed aside the novel I'd been reading and put my feet up on the desk. The windows of my office faced west and late afternoon sun struck brightly against them but very little sunlight came through the louvered screen. The overhead light was off and while Dave talked I snapped off my desk lamp so that it was twilight in the room.

He talked on and I listened and looked out from the dimness through the louvered screen across the grassy, sunny slope in front of the building. Couples strolled lazily across it; patients lounged on the benches along the driveway around the perimeter of the lawn; far down the slope there was a grove of oaks bulging green out of black shade. Most of the couples were going that way.

I listened and finally I promised to drive up and discuss the thing with him, and he hung up. I sat there with my feet on the desk, looking out across the lawn, knowing I wasn't going anywhere, not voluntarily, not unless somebody sent me.